

























# Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

BY

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The Jane Stuart Books, The Glenlock Girls' Series, etc.

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Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

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## Preface

THOSE who have not read the other books of this series may like to know that the Stuart family had come to Belhaven, a New England seashore town, to occupy a house owned by Mrs. Eliot, who is Mrs. Stuart's Aunt Caroline. At the time this story opens, Jane and David, twins, are almost fifteen. Judy, who has been somewhat spoiled on account of ill health, is twelve. Kenneth, of whom you do not hear much in this book, is ten, and really a very important member of the family. The Stuarts would not consider their family complete without a mention of Mr. Chope, who takes care of the garden, and of Sally, the horse; also of Susan Trot, a chief factor in keeping them well fed.

Donald is Aunt Caroline's grandson, and a cousin to the Stuarts. His story is told in "Jane Stuart, Twin." Carol Heath and Rob Randall are friends who go through all the books. Sylvia Browning's story is told in "Jane Stuart's Chum," and in that book, too, we find Stanley Oliver, who is something of a boaster, and thinks himself equal to any emergency, but fails when his test comes.



## Introduction

Frederick Prescott is a teacher in the Belhaven High School, and he and his sister, Hilda, are great favorites with the young people. The Nine-pin Club and the Snowshoe Club have good times, and enjoy the "House in the Woods" which Mr. Eliot, who is Uncle Stephen to the Stuarts, helped them to build.

The present story takes the Stuarts and some of their friends into the country for the summer, and the next book will tell more about Belhaven happenings.



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# Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

## CHAPTER I

### HOPES AND FEARS

"BUT, mother, when any one writes that she's going to invite all the Stuarts, and some of their friends, to spend the summer in the country with her why, you—you naturally expect her to do it, don't you?" Jane Stuart's eager gray eyes besought her mother for a favorable answer, and Mrs. Stuart laughed softly.

"Janey, you know, almost as well as I do, that when the 'some one who invites' is Aunt Caroline Eliot it would be wise for us not to count too strongly upon it." Mrs. Stuart settled a becoming hat on her brown hair, and took the hatpins her daughter held out to her. "I don't doubt that Aunt Caroline meant that when she wrote it, but that was two months ago, and she's had time to change her mind a dozen times. Just see if Mr. Chope has driven around yet, Jane. I mustn't lose that train."



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Jane poked her head out of the window in order to be sure, and the spring sunshine glinted on her golden hair. "He's just leaving the barn, mumsey, and way down the street I can see David and Don. I feel it in my bones that if Don has a letter from his grandmother she will say something about summer plans."

"You're an incorrigible optimist, dear. Now, look me over carefully, please. Am I all right?"

"You're perfectly—all—right. You're a peach of a mother. Now I'll escort you to the carriage, and, perhaps, those slow-pokes will be good enough to hurry a little bit."

Jane went down the front walk with her mother as Mr. Chope drove around from the barn and pulled up at the curb with a fine flourish. At the sound of his genial "Whoa, Sally," Judy and Kenneth appeared suddenly from somewhere, and came running to say good-bye, while Susan Trot rushed out from the kitchen to remind Mrs. Stuart to get the dish towels. At sight of all this, the two boys approaching the house changed their leisurely progress into a mad dash, the darker one waving a letter as he ran.

"It's from Aunt Caroline, I do believe," Jane cried excitedly, as she helped mother into the carriage. "Oh, Mr. Chope, please don't start this



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minute. Sally can go a little faster to make up, can't you, Sallykins?"

"Sure she can." Mr. Chope settled back comfortably, his old face wrinkling into a smile. Secretly, he was not at all unwilling to have his own curiosity satisfied. "Sally, she's jest as anxious to know what's goin' to happen this summer as if she was countin' on goin' herself."

"Any news?" called Jane, making a megaphone of her hands, though the boys had nearly reached them.

"Arrive May twenty-second—a week from to-day—hurrah!" answered her Cousin Donald all in a breath, his face radiant with happiness. "At least, she says 'we are going to try to get passage on a steamer that will arrive a day or two earlier, but unless you hear to the contrary you may expect us on the twenty-second.'"

"A week from to-day," repeated Mrs. Stuart, as Mr. Chope gathered up the reins and clucked to Sally. "Well, with one day's help from Mrs. Petersen I can finish my house-cleaning nicely. Good-bye, children. Be good to each other. Jane and David, remember I depend on you to see that everything goes right."

"We'll try," said the twins in unison.

"We'll all help."

"Have a good time."



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"Please bring me an aeroplane, mother." This last from Kenneth, who had graduated in his imagination from being a chauffeur to startling the world as an air-man.

"I wish you wouldn't always ask mother to bring you something, Ken," remarked Judy with that superior air which grated on her ten-year-old brother. "You'll make her think you don't want to see her for—for just herself."

"Oh, fudge! Mother knows how I feel 'bout her." Kenneth made the assertion stoutly, but he turned suddenly to gaze after the disappearing carriage with a look which Jane understood perfectly. There were times when she herself couldn't get to mother quickly enough, to explain, to apologize, to make amends for something said or something left undone, and she knew just how her young brother was feeling.

"Nonsense, Judy! You're always trying——" she began sharply, and then stopped short. She had a sudden feeling that if she started wrong with Judy now things would go that way all day. "Why don't you and Ken begin your gardens this morning?" she suggested after a little pause during which she swallowed several disagreeable things she wanted desperately to say.

"Good idea," put in David. "It's lucky you mentioned that, Mrs. Janes, for I should have for-



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gotten the seeds Marcia Holt gave me for Judy as I came by. She's going to plant in one bed all the seeds that are given to her, and call it a friendship garden."

"Come on, Judy. Let's do that, too. I'll divvy up on some Rob Randall gave me," Kenneth urged with enthusiasm, "and then we'll have something to surprise mother with when she gets home."

"You can have half my seeds, and we'll draw lots to see who gets that sunshiny corner," responded Judy with great fairness.

"Where is Rob this morning?" demanded Jane as the two younger children raced toward the garden.

"Oh, he'll be over later." David dropped down on the top step and the others followed his example. "He's as excited as we are over Aunt Caroline's letters. He knows that Don and I are going to invite him if—well, if the plan goes through."

Donald frowned unconsciously. Loyalty to his grandmother made him hate to think she could change her mind when she had so positively invited the whole Stuart family to go away with her for the summer. "It's queer that grandmother hasn't said a word about it in any letter since that one two months ago," he remarked with a worried air.

Jane, sitting with elbows on knees and her chin



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in her hands, gazed at him meditatively. She had had experience with Aunt Caroline's capacity for sudden change, she was thinking.

"Oh, well, I believe she means to do it, all the same," Don went on more cheerfully. "I wrote her that your chum was discovered and that David and I should like to share Rob between us, but she hasn't answered either remark."

"You can't prove it by me that people ever answer questions in their letters," observed David. "They never answer any of mine."

"Wouldn't you think he was a real little family letter-writer, Don?" Jane laughed gaily and rubbed a sisterly hand over her brother's hair, which was as yellow as her own. "I believe he's written almost two letters in the last year."

"Let go my hair," protested the victim, mincing down the path and pushing imaginary hairpins into place. "I've just washed it and I can't do a thing with it. There's the clock striking nine and mother's train whistling. I'm going to get that little round garden plot ready so mother can plant seeds in it Monday if she likes."

"I just adore having some surprise for her when she comes home," Jane said thoughtfully as the two boys left her. "She looks so pleased, and she always makes you feel that you've done the very



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thing she wanted. I might cook something, I suppose."

"Do," coaxed David. "I'm getting terribly proud of you because you're such a fine chef-ess. How do you like my French?"

"It's as marvelous as my cooking," Jane responded, and then, after the boys had disappeared, she sat quite still for a few moments, dreamily watching the drifting clouds, and the wonderful lights and shadows on the meadow opposite the house. It would be nice to have some sort of surprise for mother, she was thinking, and then her gaze, coming back to her immediate surroundings, fell on a woman going up the walk which led to the kitchen—a wiry, strong looking woman who was hurrying along as though every minute meant money to her.

"Why, it's Mrs. Petersen," Jane said aloud, jumping up quickly, and going toward the side-door for which the woman was headed. Mrs. Petersen was a Swede who did house-cleaning for nearly every one in town and was usually engaged for weeks ahead.

"I coom to ask if it ban yust so vell if I clean your moder dis morning," she said loudly. "I go to vork for anudder voman, but she is so seeck, and the doctor vill not let no one to coom into the house. I am a little late here,



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but I will later vork, or take not qvite so mooch money."

"But mother has gone away, Mrs. Petersen. She won't be home until late this afternoon."

"Ei! Too bad, too bad." The woman looked so genuinely disturbed that Jane wished vaguely she could arrange things to suit her.

"It ees the busy time when every vun vant me right away qvick," she explained. "I like not to lose out a whole day. Your moder haf engaged me for next Vednesday. Vot room is it she like me to clean?"

"I'm almost sure it's the library. Isn't it, Susan?" Jane turned to Miss Trot who had come to the door to see what it was all about.

"Yes, the libry—library, I mean," answered Susan, who sternly made herself repeat a word when she was conscious that she had mispronounced it. "We've got pretty near done except that."

"I know him." Mrs. Petersen nodded violently. "I haf many times cleaned him for Mis' Eliot before you come. I could do him yust so vell mitout your moder."

"Could you do it in a day? Before mother gets home, I mean?" The idea struck Jane suddenly that here was her chance to have a really worthwhile surprise for mother. She hesitated a mo-



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ment, remembering that the Ninepin girls had planned to meet that afternoon at Polly Reed's. Then she came back to her former idea with enthusiasm. She ought to be willing to give up something for mother, she assured herself. And, anyway, perhaps with her help, Mrs. Petersen could get the room done in time for her to go to the club meeting for a little while. No one else should have a hand in it, she decided firmly. Her mind compassed the whole situation with astonishing quickness. Already she was picturing a graceful cluster of yellow flowers on the desk as a final touch.

"Sure—sure I could do him in a day," Mrs. Petersen was saying eagerly when Jane's imagination touched earth again. "I do his rug—his vindows—his paint——" she was striding up the steps as she spoke, and tossing off her words so airily that to Jane's ardent fancy the room was half done already.

"I don't feel any too sure your ma would like it, Miss Jane," said Susan Trot, barring Mrs. Petersen's progress in dignified protest. Her black eyes were snapping, and her voice was very firm.

"Oh, Susan, why not? Just think how nice it will be when she comes home tired to find that room all fresh and clean and—and restful."

Miss Trot's firmness melted. She could not



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stand the disappointment in Jane's voice, though her judgment told her that Saturday, with nine o'clock already past, was not a good time to begin to clean a room.

"I'm afraid I can't help much. I've got started on my bakin'," she said slowly. "But I'll do all I can later."

"You won't have to do a thing," Jane promised rashly. "Mrs. Petersen and I are going to do it all, aren't we, Mrs. Petersen?"

"Sure—sure," assented that energetic woman with cheerful enthusiasm. "First I takes his rug up into the attic and scrubs him. It is so I have always done him for Mis' Eliot. Then, vile he dries, I go do everyting else."

"Well, if you've done it that way for Aunt Caroline it's all right for us. But what shall I begin on? I want to work too."

"You run away and amoose yourself." Mrs. Petersen's quick eye traveled from Jane's pink gingham to her hands, which looked as if they were not accustomed to hard work.

"Oh, I'm going to change my dress, of course," Jane explained hastily, and then heroically choosing what she should least like to do, "suppose I dust the books." If she were going to make a sacrifice for mother it should be a good one, she assured herself.



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"All right—all right. You make them clean—I vash the shelves—you put them back. I"—Mrs. Petersen nearly choked herself with a shrill laugh—"I am yust so like to stand them on their heads."

Jane hurried into her oldest dress, but took more time than she intended in the construction of a dust-cap. "I may have to answer the bell," she apologized to the Jane in the mirror. "Anyway I can work better if I know it's becoming."

Mrs. Petersen being up in the attic, she had the library all to herself for a while, and she worked steadily, wiping the books with a soft cloth and flapping the covers gently. Through the open windows floated the sound of people talking as they went by the house, but she sternly kept her eyes on her task, and refrained even from opening a book for fear she should get interested. Once she stopped and listened and almost called to the boys as they went up-stairs. They were talking, and she could hear Rob Randall's mirthful laugh, and she wanted desperately to know what it was all about.

At last Judy opened the door, and seeing her sister's occupation walked across the room, and stood by the step-ladder on which Jane was at that moment poised, apparently investigating the wall-paper.



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"Want any help?" Judy asked sweetly, a little envious feeling taking possession of her at sight of her sister's capable manner.

"No, thank you." Jane's serene politeness made her occupation seem even more desirable. "You'd better run out. You'll be covered with dust."

"Humph! You don't seem to be getting along very fast." Judy retreated toward the door, but lingered to watch with fascinated gaze.

"It only seems so. A little later you'll see how much I've really done," answered Jane. "Would you mind asking Susan to make me some paste? I've just found out that there's a piece of the border loose, and it came off a little more when I touched it."

"You're not going to dare to paste that wallpaper, Jane Stuart!"

"Why not?" Jane responded airily. "Do see about the paste. I'll do as much for you some day."

By the time Judy, escorted by Kenneth, had brought in the paste, Mrs. Petersen had arrived with pail and cloths, and had begun cleaning the paint.

"Shut the door into the hall, please, Ken. The wind flutters this paper so I can't manage it." Jane set the pan containing a liberal supply of



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paste on top of the step-ladder, and went up a step or two higher as she spoke.

Judy and Ken watched with ill-concealed desire while their sister spread the paste in what she conceived to be a masterly manner. Then she laid down her brush, stood cautiously erect, took hold as near the end of the border as she could and gently pulled it straight.

At that instant it seemed to her that a dozen things happened at once. The door was flung open, and David, Don and Rob rushed into the room. The sudden draft swept the strip of border from Jane's slippery grasp, and swirled it like a sticky plaster across her mouth and half-way around her neck. Instinctively she shut her eyes; then, gasping, and groping blindly for support, she plunged one hand deep into the paste and sent the pan clattering to the floor. With a wild whoop Kenneth, who had been watching open-mouthed, took a hasty step backward and fitted himself neatly into Mrs. Petersen's pail of water which she had that minute set down behind him.

"Oo-ouch," spluttered Jane, wavering perilously on the ladder, and trying to peel the sticky paper from her face without tearing it. "Stop laughing, you horrid things, and do something qu-ick."

"Poor little Jane! Who'd ever think she'd be the most stuck-up girl in Belhaven," chuckled



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Rob, coming to the rescue after what seemed to the victim an interminable time.

"I suppose there are yards of border off now," she moaned with stiffening lips, not daring yet to open her eyes.

"Not more than a yard, and it isn't torn. I'll paste it for you if we can scoop up enough paste."

"I told you we should make a sensation, Davy," Donald said as he extracted Kenneth from the pail and set him on his feet. And then Jane blinked her eyes open, and saw that her cousin was holding a telegram.

"Tell me now before my mouth gets any—stucker," she mumbled, wondering if she could ever forget the flavor of paste.

"Who do you think is in Boston—this very morning—and coming to Belhaven this afternoon?"

Jane's mind was not stuck, if her features were, and it leaped to the right conclusion with surprising quickness. "N-not Aunt Caroline," she said, funnily tragic in tone and expression.

"Yes. They caught a boat a week earlier. They're coming out on the two-thirty, and they'll stay for supper."

"Donald Lee, they can't. They—they mustn't." In her anguish Jane forgot her stickiness, and put



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her pastiest hand to her forehead, but no one dared to smile. "This house belongs to Aunt Caroline, and the library is her favorite room, and it's all upset, and the rug isn't dry, and nothing's ready, and—and mother isn't here." With which heartfelt conclusion she started toward the door, feeling she could no longer bear the burden of unexpected events.

Half-way there she turned involuntarily to look at the little group she was leaving, and found a certain consolation in the queer perplexity written on the faces of the older boys. In her secret heart she knew they were expecting her to find a way out of the trouble. Her eyes roved to her younger brother, and changed in their expression from real distress to lurking merriment, for Mrs. Petersen, to whom life was one perpetual round of cleaning, had seized him by the collar, and was rubbing him down like a piece of furniture. The meek submission of Ken's attitude and expression penetrated Jane's gloom and made her giggle in spite of herself, and at this pleasant sound there was a chorus of laughter from the others which successfully cleared the atmosphere.

"There! Now we're all better," said David in a tone of great relief. "Tell us what to do, Mrs. Janes, and we'll pitch in."

"I'll polish the andirons and the brass candle-



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sticks, and—and anything else you tell me,” Judy offered.

“That’s sweet of you, Judy,” said Jane, remorsefully mindful of the fact that she had airily refused Judy’s previous offer of help. “We’ll manage to put the room in order some way, I do believe.” She was quite herself again by this time, and there was a sparkle of excitement in her eye which her generally pasty appearance couldn’t wholly obscure. After all, she was thinking, it would be a great deal more fun to do what seemed impossible.

“For the honor of the Stuarts!” she exclaimed, snatching up the poker and waving it aloft. “Now the Stuart parade—once around,” and, to the wide-eyed amazement of Mrs. Petersen, the four Stuarts marched gravely around the room, Jane at the head, juggling the poker in true drum-major fashion, while Ken tooted an imaginary fife, and David conscientiously beat a drum which none but he could see. Judy brought up the rear a little self-consciously. For her the joys of the imagination were not so keen as to the others. Besides, she secretly felt they were getting too old for this sort of thing.

“There!” said Jane, stopping with a triumphal flourish in front of the tall clock. “It’s fourteen—and a half—minutes past eleven. Mrs. Petersen, if the boys wash the windows, and Judy



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polishes the brass, and I finish the books, do you think you can do the rest?"

"Sure—sure," responded Mrs. Petersen with cheerful courage. "I go feel of the rug and tell him to get dry so qvick as he can," and quite charmed with her own little joke, she trotted off to the tune of her high-pitched, cackling laugh, which sent Kenneth into another fit of giggles.

"Now, fellow-citizens," Jane went on, feeling more like a commander-in-chief than her pastiness warranted, "it's almost fun to clean windows when you use some stuff that Susan will give you. Only don't bother her more than you have to, because she's got to get up a company supper. Thank goodness, Judy, no one cleans brass any better than you do, and you don't have to be told a thing about it." With which tactful compliment Jane departed to consult Susan about supper, and scrape off as much paste as she could. When she returned, ten minutes later, three of the boys were at work on the windows, and Rob, having pasted the wall-paper, was ready to help her with the books.

"Now it actually begins to look finished," exulted Jane, when the boys brought the rug from the attic and spread it on the floor. It was half-past two, and with the exception of twenty minutes for a hasty lunch, they had all worked steadily up to that time. "I didn't know but that we should



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have to make Aunt Caroline wear rubbers, but that rug's as dry as—as anything. It just shows, doesn't it, what great minds can do?"

"Great hands," murmured Rob, regarding his own soiled ones.

"Don't interrupt my compliments. Did you ever see anything glisten like those lovely windows? I should think mother would love to have you and Don do them all the time, Spinksy dear," Jane went on with a malicious giggle. "Judy, your andirons are great. I don't see how you do them so well."

"The books look perfectly fine," returned Judy, who was trying hard to keep herself from too openly admiring her own handiwork. "Say, Jane," she added in a lower tone, "if Aunt Caroline doesn't mention our going away this summer are you going to remind her?"

It was so exactly the problem Jane's mind had been working on that she felt almost guilty.

"Why, of course not," she answered with sudden decision. "When a person makes plans like that, and then changes 'em, you can't say anything or do anything. You just have to bear it. Anyway, perhaps she hasn't forgotten. You know"—Jane's dimple danced into view for an instant, "Aunt Caroline sometimes does just what you don't expect."



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David, coming up behind his twin, grinned understandingly. "You know how it is yourself, don't you, Mrs. Janes?" he said under his breath. "Say, if there's nothing more you want us to do, Don and I are going up to make ourselves beautiful."

"Will some one please get me out of this thing?" Rob said plaintively. "I believe Susan tied it in a hard knot on purpose."

Jane laughed in spite of her weariness, as the three older boys, flushed, and streaked with the soil of honest labor, struggled with the aprons which Miss Trot had tied with a firm hand. "Oh, for a camera! You'd make a beautiful snapshot. The lights and shadows—'specially the shadows—are so strong," she giggled. "Here, I'll help you, Don. You're only making it worse."

"You're not so shadow-less yourself," retorted David. "You've got a great splotch on your forehead, and ——"

The crunching of gravel on the front walk made him stop suddenly and look wildly in that direction. At the same instant Ken dodged away from the front window, eager mischief in his gaze.

"It's three perfectly lovely girls; two of 'em dark and the other—well, the other's sort of brown. And they're dressed up so nice and



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pretty and clean," he ended, manifestly delighted at the effect of his announcement.

"Great Scott!" breathed David, looking vainly for an avenue of escape other than through the front hall. "Hold the fort, Jane; don't open the door yet. Come on, boys."

Almost too tired to tease, but quite unable to resist the opportunity offered, Jane threw open the front door in the midst of a mad rush up-stairs, complicated by falling over aprons, and ending in a stealthy retreat along the upper hall.

"Ostriches!" remarked Carol Heath, in a calm, distinct voice, as she walked in, followed by Sylvia Browning and Molly Oliver. "I s'pose they're flattering themselves that we haven't the faintest idea who they are."

"You all look so uncommonly fine we were afraid you'd cut us," came in muffled tones from above, and then an agonized protest, "Say, Rob, you're sawing my nose off with that beastly apron."

"They're probably trying to take them off over their heads without unfastening them," explained Jane with a laugh, and then sank limply on the hall seat.

"Poor little Jane," said Sylvia, holding out a bunch of yellow flowers. "Brownie sent these over to your mother, and we've come to take you



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up to Polly's. But what have you been doing to yourself? You look tired to death."

"I am. I mean I shan't be long. Oh, Sylvy, those flowers are just what I needed for a finishing touch. What do you think! Aunt Caroline will be here in"—Jane cast an apprehensive glance at the clock—"mercy! in thirty-five minutes. I can't stop another second. You see I want all of us to be dressed and cool and rested. I should hate to see people look all tired out getting ready for me if I were visiting, shouldn't you?" she ended wearily.

"You won't," comforted Molly. "We'll hunt up a vase and fix the flowers, and then we'll slip off quietly. I suppose we'd only be in the way if we tried to help you dress."

"Oh, thank you, I can manage that all right. Fixing the flowers did seem like a last straw, though. You'll find a bowl in the dining-room closet, and please put them on that table between the windows."

As she stepped to the library door to point out the exact place for the flowers, Jane's unconquerable spirit went up several notches. "Haven't I the dandy family to help me do all that?" she said, her eyes brightening at sight of the room. "And just at first I was so conceited I wasn't going to let one of them lay a finger on it. I tell you



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it's something like to have brothers and a sister that'll rally 'round the flag like that. Judy Stuart, why don't you make me stop talking? There are only twenty-nine minutes left," and Jane was off like a breeze.



## CHAPTER II

### AN INVITATION

THE train obligingly being not quite on time, it was a half-hour later when Jane, rosy and refreshed, flew over the stairs again at the sound of a carriage stopping before the house.

"Dear me, the boys did get out there first, didn't they?" chattered Judy, hurrying after her. "Oh, there's Uncle Stephen! Isn't he a darling dear? Doesn't Don look perfectly happy?"

The two girls reached the carriage just as Donald set his little grandmother on the ground, and turned to meet his grandfather.

Aunt Caroline, pink-cheeked and animated as ever, greeted her nieces rapturously. "You certainly are relatives to be proud of," she began, speaking her mind with her customary frankness. "Jane, I shall never cease to regret that I didn't take you with me. Yes, I know she had to be in school, Stephen. You needn't remind me."

By this time she was going briskly up the front walk with her arm around Jane's waist, and



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Donald beside her. With a strong sense of satisfaction Jane turned to the library as soon as they entered the house, and seated her aunt in the chair from which she could get the best view of the entire room. Judy took hat and gloves and coat, while Ken hovered around with a footstool, ready to place it as soon as the girls should get out of the way. Uncle Stephen had settled himself on the sofa with a tall boy on each side of him, and was taking in the whole scene with that kind smile of his.

“My, how clean and cool and restful this looks,” said Aunt Caroline, nestling into the big chair, and putting her trim little shoes on Ken’s footstool. “I always did love this room. I believe I’d like to spend the summer here. Will you take me to board?”

At the word summer five pairs of eyes fastened themselves upon her with an intentness which she mistook for apprehension.

“Mercy! don’t look so worried,” she went on with a laugh. “Oh, Donald, do you remember meeting the Fords? They came over on the steamer with us, and they have such interesting summer plans, and want us to join them. I must tell you about it.” This time five hearts thumped forlornly.

“Are you—are you going to?” Kenneth had



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edged up to her and was speaking with an anxiety that made Jane grit her teeth.

“Going to? Going to what?” demanded Aunt Caroline, whose mind had already started in another direction. “Donald, you look like another boy from the one I left here. And Julia has grown—inches—and she’s getting plump and rosy, I do believe. As for the others, they always looked healthy. Belhaven is a nice place to stay in, isn’t it? One doesn’t really need to get away even in summer.”

There was a low murmur of dissent from the shameless Kenneth, who was promptly suppressed by David.

“Grandmother, have you forgotten ——” began Donald with some anxiety, but Aunt Caroline was off again before he could finish.

“I’ve forgotten nothing. I’ve brought each one of you something, and I want to tell you just where it came from because that will make it more interesting. Stephen, have you taken everything—even to the last little box—out of your pockets?”

And then the Stuarts discovered that Uncle Stephen had been slyly putting little packages of various shapes beside him on the sofa, and that there was a bag on the floor at his feet. At his wife’s question he went gravely through his pockets again, but it was a fruitless investigation.



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"Everything out," he said at last. "Now get at it, Caroline, for that train goes early, and I want to look over the place with Mr. Chope."

Then followed a distribution of gifts which made them all open their eyes, and decide, each in his own heart, that it would be small business to complain even if Aunt Caroline never said another word about taking them away for the summer. And each gift had its own story, told in such detail that Ken looked anxiously at the clock more than once.

Uncle Stephen had to leave to see Mr. Chope before the packages came to an end, and just at the last mother came, in time to share the gifts. Jane could hear sounds from the dining-room which indicated that Susan Trot was making last preparations for supper. She was sadly certain by this time that the summer going-away plan was all a blissful dream which they ought never to have thought twice about. The presents were lovely, and Aunt Caroline was most generous, she told herself over and over, trying her best to shut from her mind the vivid pictures her fancy had painted.

Kenneth's surprised voice roused her from her meditations. "Why, here's one more package way down in a corner of the bag, Aunt Caroline," he was saying hopefully. "You thought they were all out, didn't you?"



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"That," answered Aunt Caroline, feeling of it thoughtfully, "that is something I bought for your mother. I thought she'd like it this summer when we all go into the country."

An instant before that they had all been polite young people, properly grateful for the generous gifts she had brought to them. Now they cheered her to the echo, Judy hugged her, David and Don slapped each other on the back, and Kenneth performed a wild dance.

"For pity's sake, Elizabeth!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline with what breath Judy's vigorous embrace had left her. "You may be used to young savages, but I'm not. What does it all mean?"

"Oh, grandmother, don't you see?" said Donald. "We thought you were never going to say another word about that summer plan, and that probably you had—you had given it up."

"I must say," began the little lady with heightened color, but stopped to stare at Jane, who had been economizing space by putting on all of her wearable gifts, and now stood before her great-aunt, a colorful, vivid figure. A quaint lace cap adorned her golden head, strings of beads hung around her neck, a wonderful Roman sash encircled her waist and draped one shoulder. She was like some gay foreign picture, and yet she was Jane, carried out of herself by the feeling of the moment,



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and quite forgetting everything else in this unexpected joy.

"Oh, Aunt Caroline," she said, her gray eyes growing big and dark, "you're perfectly wonderful. After all these lovely presents we couldn't have said a word if you'd never mentioned summer. But, oh, we do want to go. From now on we shall know you're going to do just what you say; we shan't expect you to change your mind; we ——" and then, warned by the tense stillness about her, Jane suddenly realized what she was implying, and stopped, and looked at mother with guilty eyes.

"Well, upon my word!" said Aunt Caroline with some irritation. "I wrote Donald that I wanted you all to go away with us, didn't I? I didn't suppose it was necessary to keep on saying it. I cannot understand why people never seem to think I mean what I say. We met a friend of your Uncle Stephen on the steamer, and he wanted to rent for this summer the very place for us. I never have any trouble arranging things. But there it was again; your uncle could hardly wait until we landed to have me sign the papers, he was so afraid I'd change my mind."

Aunt Caroline ended with a distinctly aggrieved expression which made them all feel uncomfortable. Kenneth, wriggling in his chair, cast a



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glance toward the dining-room, and saw Susan Trot coming to announce supper.

"I'll get Uncle Stephen," he remarked, starting toward the door. And then struck by a sudden idea, he paused in front of his aunt and regarded her beamingly. "Say —— I mean, Aunt Caroline," he began in his most ingratiating manner. "Did you ever eat any of Susan's biscuits? Because—because when you do you'll like 'em so much that'll be one thing you'll never change your mind about."

Aunt Caroline gave a little surprised laugh, and astonished every one by putting her arm around Kenneth's neck.

"Lead me to the dining-room," she commanded, and then with a funny toss of her head, "I'll begin now to form good habits."

Before it was time to start for the train, the Stuarts were in possession of everything that their relatives could tell them.

"It's called Rivercroft," Aunt Caroline said, producing some snapshots of a palatial white house, set on a hill, in the midst of beautiful surroundings. "It's so big that I decided at once that Jane must invite three girls, and Don and David may each invite a boy. We don't want to rattle around in it. It has all the modern improvements, including a cat and a parrot which



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have been left with a caretaker," she ended with a laugh.

"Uncle Stephen's been telling me about 'em," remarked Judy. "The parrot's name is Cora, and the man said that you never know what she's going to say next."

"It's all too grand to suit me," Uncle Stephen declared. "Too much like a hotel. But the real woods are not far, and I shall run away with some of your party."

"All right. You may take them all some time, and I'll have a grown-up house-party," his wife responded with great amiability. "There's a smaller house quite near us, your friend told me, and I'm going to see if I can get some one I know to rent that."

She was standing before the mirror as she spoke, putting on her hat, and Kenneth, near by, with hands thrust deep in his pockets, was watching her admiringly. He was beginning to feel a certain comradeship for this bright-eyed lady who expected things to happen just because she wanted them.

"Well, I bet you'll do it if you try," he said with such conviction that they all laughed, and for the second time Aunt Caroline put her arm around his neck and gave him a little squeeze. Then in another five minutes she and Uncle



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Stephen had gone, and the day for which the Stuarts had waited so long was over.

After this for a while spring forgot that it had tried so successfully to be summer, and gave them a week of blustering winds and cold rains which made good times in the open air out of the question.

"I shall begin to look for gray hairs pretty soon," Jane said distractedly one afternoon. "It's not much more than a week since Aunt Caroline said you could each invite a boy, and I might take three girls, and we're no nearer deciding than we were then."

"It would be lots better for us if you could make up your mind." They were in the library after dinner, and David stopped to lay another stick of wood on the open fire, which made summer seem a long way off.

"There, that's what he says every time, mother." Jane's voice held distinct irritation. "Just as if it were the easiest thing in the world for me."

"Don wants to invite Mr. Prescott, but we know he won't go anywhere without his family. And we don't want to ask Ned Holt, unless you're going to have Serena."

"We're off again. Same old argument," Jane responded forlornly. "I want to have Polly just as much as I do Serena, and if I invite either of



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them some one else will feel hurt. Oh, dear, I believe I'll beg Aunt Caroline to let me take just Carol and Sylvia, as I planned in the first place."

"I heard you say this morning that you thought you'd invite Molly Oliver," said mother with a suggestive note in her voice.

"Yes, but I can't, because Molly wouldn't go without Stan. Oh, that's what you mean! You think the boys might ask him." Jane was rapidly putting into words the idea which had occurred to all of them. "Oh, mother!"

Mrs. Stuart let her sewing fall, and confronted three sober faces with her disarming smile. "It is rather bad of me, isn't it, when you like all the other boys so much better," she said slowly. "I know you think I've given you Stanley in rather large doses, but don't you think it has made a difference?"

David, who never could resist the appeal in his mother's voice, nodded understandingly, but before he could speak his mind on the subject, his sister's verdict came.

"It did make a difference for a while," she conceded, "and I will say for him that he doesn't boast the way he used to. But he's always getting sulky for no reason at all, and thinking we've slighted him. Of course you don't see him that way, mother, but we do." There was a distinctly



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mutinous expression about Jane's mouth as she ended which made her mother look at her thoughtfully.

"Well, anyway, he's a different chap altogether when he's with mother, so let her have her say out," protested David. "Go on, please, mother, and tell us what you want."

"Well, you all know," began mother very much as though she were confessing a fault, "in spite of the fact that I own four of the nicest children in the world, I can't help mothering other children when I think they need it."

"Hear—hear," murmured Donald, bending over to lay in her lap a spray of lilac he had been absently twirling. "I'm your best proof of that, Cousin Elizabeth."

Mrs. Stuart patted the brown hand before it could retreat. "You see Molly happened to tell me yesterday that she and Stanley are to be alone, except for the housekeeper, almost all summer, because their father is going west on a long business trip."

"I should think he might take his only son and let us have Mollyolly," Jane put in resentfully. "If we invite Stan it doesn't seem fair to the other boys who have been such trumps all the time."

"Perhaps that's true," mother admitted, but there was a look of disappointment in her eyes



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which made Jane uncomfortable. "We can't make plans for Mr. Oliver, though, and if the Prescotts should go away there'll be no one here to stand by in case those boys we don't like try to get hold of Stanley again."

"I happen to know that they have been at him again. I'll invite him," said David, speaking with such unusual promptness that he took the words out of Donald's mouth. "You can have Rob, Don."

"I suppose then there's nothing for me to do but decide on Molly," murmured Jane, feeling a little hurt at having her opinions so completely overridden. "Well, luckily, I want her. Are you going over now to invite Stan?" she added, as her twin started toward the hall.

"I should say not. I've got a theme to write this afternoon. Come on, Don, there's a lovely sunlit room up-stairs just waiting for two studious little boys I might mention."

"Humph! sunshine!" Jane looked out at misty rain and heavy clouds.

"That's 'poetic license,'" remarked her brother serenely. "Anyway, the room's there, and D. Senior and I have got to get busy. *Au revoir, ma mère et ma sœur!* Say, that's rather neat, isn't it? I'm quite taken with my French accent."

"No one else is," retorted Jane crushingly as



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the two boys disappeared. Then her gaze wandered again to the gray landscape, and she was silent for so long that her mother looked at her more than once and wondered what she was thinking about.

Suddenly she turned and faced her mother. "Do you know, Mumsey, it was a day like this about two months ago that you and I were in this same room and we were talking about Stan. And he seemed so changed after—after Molly's accident," Jane shivered a little in spite of herself, "that I was sure it was going to last. You thought so, too, didn't you, mother?"

"Yes," agreed mother, folding her finished work, and going across to the window to stand by Jane. "But I think I know why it didn't."

"Why, mother! I'm sure we all did everything we could."

"Yes," said mother again, "for about four weeks his friends did so much that the boy was quite overwhelmed by the attention he received. And then, naturally, you were all absorbed in something else, and Stanley, who has an unfortunate disposition, felt slighted."

"Well, I don't see that we're to blame," Jane said sharply, and then she pulled mother's arm around her neck, and cuddled her cheek into its warmth.



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"Neither do I. Yet perhaps if we'd been more persistent —— I tell you, Janey, making over the person one has been for fifteen years is no light undertaking, and you can't expect it to be done in a hurry, or even to go on steadily. As I see it, this invitation to Stanley is one of the chances given you and David to do something really worth while."

There was another silence, at the end of which Jane said meekly, "Do you mind if I run over to Molly's now and invite her? Of course I shall say that we want them both, and that Davy will go over later."

Mother nodded understandingly, and went into the hall with Jane while she put on her rainy-day armor. Suddenly the little lady of the steadfast brown eyes found herself in one of her daughter's ardent embraces.

"Mother, when you stand there smiling at me, with all those little dancing lights in your eyes, I could do anything. If Molly and Stan had a mother, probably everything would be different." Jane released her mother and turned to get her umbrella. "I ought to be studying this blessed minute, but I can't until this is off my mind."

Before Jane could ring the door-bell, the house-keeper, who had seen her coming, opened the door noiselessly. "Molly's in the little sitting-room,"



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she said in the toneless, depressing voice which always dashed Jane's good spirits, and then gliding off in another direction she left the visitor to find her way through the library to the small inner room where Molly always entertained her girl friends.

Jane pushed back the heavy curtains which separated the rooms, but to her surprise no one was there except the kitten curled on the sofa in the farther end of the room. She paused a moment perplexedly, then went to sit down beside the soft yellow bunch, sensibly concluding that Molly had gone up-stairs, and would be back directly. After a few moments the thought of her unlearned lessons began to fret her, and she got up lingeringly from the sofa, her hand still on the soft fur, and debated whether it would be better to go out and ring the door-bell, or whether she might slip out unnoticed and come back another time.

"The housekeeper would tell Molly I'd been here, and she'd think it was funny," she said to herself, and then, having taken one step away from the sofa, she stopped suddenly, because she heard a voice, Mr. Oliver's, she was sure, speaking very sternly. The next instant she realized that he and Stanley had come into the library and that her only way of escape was blocked.



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“The minute I come back I’m met with complaints about you,” Mr. Oliver was saying with what seemed like terrible severity to the listener’s unaccustomed ears. “I’ve had about all I can stand of this nonsense, and I’m going ——” Jane stuck her fingers in her ears, lost the rest of that sentence, and failed to hear anything but a subdued muttering on Stanley’s part. After that she caught in spite of herself disconnected words; the name of the housekeeper, something about Molly, a reference to school which she didn’t understand. In imagination she could see Mr. Oliver, dark and angry-looking, and even with her ears stopped she could tell by the continuous rumble of the deep voice that Stanley had small chance to justify himself, if he wanted to. She tried desperately not to hear, but knew no way to avoid being a listener. She was so little used to angry scolding that even when it was expended upon some one else it made her strangely uncomfortable and forlorn.

All at once she realized that the conversation had ceased, and she took her fingers from her ears, and heard retreating footsteps, and then Mr. Oliver’s voice, still peremptory, saying, “Get your hat now and do that errand I told you about. And don’t stop to ——” The last of the sentence was lost in the slam of the front door, and then Jane could hear some one going up-stairs.



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“Probably he’s gone up to scold Molly now,” she said to herself indignantly. “I—I can’t believe my father would have been like that if he had lived.” And then with only one purpose, that of getting away, strong in her mind, she began to tiptoe toward the library. She did not care now if the housekeeper did tell Molly she had been there.

Suddenly there was the sound of some one running down-stairs, quick steps in the library, the hasty flinging aside of the curtains.

“I—I thought you’d gone,” stammered Jane, half frightened by Stanley’s white face and angry eyes, and helplessly conscious of the desire to make him more comfortable.

“I came for my cap.” He strode to the table, and impatiently pushed books and magazines out of place. Suddenly he turned to Jane: “How—how long have you been here?”

“A little while—I don’t know exactly. The housekeeper told me I should find Molly here.” And then, realizing that her greatest safety was to plunge into the middle of things, “Oh, Stan, I came over to ask you and Molly to spend the summer at Rivercroft with us. You’ve heard us talk about Aunt Caroline’s plan, and we’re crazy to have you both go. David’s coming over to tell you all about it, but I couldn’t wait.”



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Jane had been backing toward the front door while she talked, and Stanley was following her in a dazed way, as though nothing so much in the future as summer plans could penetrate the deep gloom which enfolded him.

"I'll call Molly," he said at last, but Jane with her hand on the knob protested eagerly. "No, please, don't. I've been here such a long—I mean I must go home and study. You tell Molly and—and your father, and come in after supper and talk it over with us. Remember we—we can't get along without you, Stan." And then, in response to the incredulous, unhappy expression of the boy's eyes, Jane found herself assuring him all over again, as she finally backed out of the door, of their great need and desire for his presence.

As Jane walked home under the dripping trees her mind was busy with the experience just past. "As soon as Stan thinks it over he'll know I was there through it all, and he'll be sure I heard everything," she told herself uncomfortably. "Probably he won't like me any the better for it. People always seem to dislike you if you know something disagreeable about them, even if you can't help it." In her absorption she splashed straight into a small pond on the sidewalk, thereby bringing herself back to a knowl-



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edge of her surroundings. "I'm afraid I said more than I really meant about wanting Stan," she meditated ruefully, as she went into the house, "but I just couldn't help trying to make him feel better. Oh, dear, such is life! I suppose now all I can do is to try to mean it." Which was a praiseworthy resolve, and might have accomplished much if she had kept it.

A week later Sylvia and Jane went to town one afternoon to do some shopping for a party which Sylvia was planning for Pansy and Peter O'Brien, who shared the same birthday.

"You're a real fairy godmother for Pansy," said Jane wistfully, thinking that she should like to be able to bestow gifts so lavishly.

"Well, didn't she give me my first start in society?" laughed Sylvia. "I owe her a great deal. Say, Jane, now that the errands are done let's go to the Art Museum and see those pictures Mr. Prescott told us about."

"All right," agreed Jane, always enthusiastic over the idea of looking at pictures. "But, Sylvy, you don't stand tramping as well as I do. Do you suppose you ought to go this afternoon?"

"If I'm tired I'll rest." And so it happened some time later that Sylvia dropped down on a welcome seat, and Jane went off by herself for a while.



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As her friend walked away, Sylvia realized that she had sat down directly opposite a picture she had seen before and liked very much. At the same time she noticed that a small boy had quietly ensconced himself on the other end of the seat and was looking at her interestedly.

For a moment she thought she would speak to him, but even some months of devoted allegiance from Pansy O'Brien had not made her wholly lose her shyness with children. So she turned her face to the picture and lost herself in it, as she usually did.

It was a painting of a shady country road wandering invitingly up a hill, and just over the crest of the hill one caught a glimpse of a house and a spacious barn. A stone wall followed one side of the road, and beyond that there were trees with amber sunlight dropping through them, and a hint of wild-flowers and cool shadows. Involuntarily Sylvia drew a deep breath as she gazed; it seemed to her she could almost smell the sweet country air. She found herself wondering as she so often did what she should see if she could keep on to the top of the hill.

"That's some picture, don't you think?" a childish voice said questioningly, and Sylvia turned to find that her small neighbor had pushed himself along the seat, and was looking



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at her with large brown eyes, wholly confiding and friendly in their expression. "I've been watching you, and I bet you like it as much as I do," the clear voice went on. "I come in here to look at it every time I get a chance. I'm always wishing——" he stopped, suddenly shy, turned his head away and stared at his shabby shoes as though noticing them for the first time. Sylvia could see how the color rushed into his face from the firm little chin to the waves of thick, reddish-brown hair.

"I love it," she said quickly. "I was just wondering what I should see if I could only get up to the top of the hill."

The long dark lashes lifted, and the boy's eyes looked straight into hers again in eager surprise.

"I never s'posed any one else would feel that way. I'm always wishing I could go down the other side and find out who lives in that house. Do you think, p'raps—there could be—a mother and a father there?"

There was so wistful a note in his voice that Sylvia felt the queer tightness in her throat which lately she had been learning to forget.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised," she answered dreamily. "And there might be a boy or a girl about as old as you, and—perhaps—a baby."

"I'm seven, and I'm very strong, of course," the



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boy was half-unconsciously doubling his small fist and testing an imperceptible muscle, "but babies do make your shoulders ache. I like 'em, though," he added hastily. "Almost any relation would do, but I'm most p'ticular 'bout finding a mother and father." The eyes which met Sylvia's held the glimmer of a smile, otherwise the small face was quite serious.

"So should I be," Sylvia echoed with a little sigh, "because I haven't any."

"Then—if we ever do get there—you shall have first chance at 'em. There'll be so much for me, 'cause I've never even seen the country." The words poured forth with eager generosity as the boy slipped off the seat and stood before her. "Sometimes I dream 'bout it—the country, I mean. Do you s'pose the real thing could be as good as the pictures?"

"A hundred times better." There was a reassuring certainty about the answer which made the boy's face brighten, and at that instant Sylvia caught the first hint of an idea which made her draw in her breath sharply.

"How I wish you could go home with me, and stay over Sunday," she said impetuously. "Would you like it, and would your people let you? It isn't real country where I live, but it's very different from the city."



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"Would I like it? Well, I should ——" a sudden happy light flamed in the boy's eyes, then faded. "She'd never let me go," he sighed. "She needs me to take care of the baby." He turned away, and Sylvia could see that he clenched both hands and swallowed hard. "She's the fattest baby on our block," he said a moment later with a magnificent attempt at manly indifference. "She can say 'Mar' already. My name is Martin, you know."

"Well, Martin, if you don't live too far away I'm going home with you and ask that baby to let you off for over Sunday." Sylvia voiced her resolve with a courage that surprised herself. "That sounded almost like Jane," she exulted in her inmost heart, and then, at thought of her friend, turned to see her coming toward them.

Sylvia went hastily to meet her. "Oh, Jane," she said so softly that no one else could hear, "he's never been in the country, and he wants to find a mother and father. Isn't it pathetic? And won't you come with me to see if he may go to Belhaven with me over Sunday?"

"But where does he live? Have we time? Do you suppose just the two of us ought to go?" With Sylvia turning rash and enthusiastic Jane felt that she must curb her own adventurous spirit.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"I don't know. I'll ask him. We shall have time if it's near, and, Jane, I feel as if I must go whether you do or not." With which mildly obstinate decision Sylvia turned her attention to the small boy who had been looking hopefully at them while they talked.

"He says it's only two or three streets away," she reported triumphantly, "and that the old man who checks the umbrellas lives across the street from him, and brings him here very often."

"Oh," said Jane, much relieved, and starting at once toward the stairs, "that's a different story. It is something like a story, isn't it? If Spinksy and Rob were here they'd give it some nonsensical title like—'The Mystery of the Umbrella Man, or Sylvia's Discovery.'"

"Don't," whispered Sylvia, who was beginning to have misgivings and to take the whole thing very seriously, "please don't make fun of it."



## CHAPTER III

MARTIN JOY

"HE's the finest little chap in the world, miss, and you can't make any mistake in doin' him a kindness," the gray old umbrella man said when Jane had told him what they wanted. "He lives two streets back of here with a Mrs. Bolton. She's a very nice sort of woman, and it's a perfectly respectable place for you to go." He spoke with a sort of eagerness as though he loved the boy and would be glad to have him pleased.

"It's one of the old streets and the houses used to be fine and grand," he went on as they turned away. "And say, you might find Mrs. B. a little diffikilt at first, but she's one great woman, I can tell you."

They had almost reached the door when Martin slipped away and went back to shake hands with his friend the check-man. "We always wish each other good luck till we meet again," he explained gravely when he returned, and then he took the lead, walking rapidly, and occasionally looking back as though he feared his vision of happiness,



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

embodied in Sylvia, might disappear if he didn't keep watch.

"Here are the 'fine grand houses,'" Jane said, as they turned into a short street with a little park in the center. "Don't you sometimes feel sorry for the old houses that have been loved and taken care of, and then have—have gone to seed like this? Do look at that one at the end of the street, facing this way, with the handsome iron fence, and the windows all boarded up."

"What do you suppose that old man meant about Mrs. Bolton being difficult?" Sylvia evidently hadn't been paying any attention to her friend's remarks, and Jane noticed for the first time that she was looking pale and rather scared. "I'm all of a tremble, Jane," she half whispered. "You'll have to do the talking."

"Trust to me! I'll defend you with ——"

"We live at thirty-four—in the basement," interrupted Martin, running back suddenly and giving Sylvia's hand a shy squeeze. "Don't you—don't you be afraid if she's cross. I'll take care of you. I guess I'd better go in first." He spoke under his breath, and slipped quietly down the steps to a door from which issued the fretting cry of a baby, and the thumping of a flatiron.

The two girls, unconsciously imitative, stole down the steps in his wake, but halted involuntarily



## Martin Joy

as Mrs. Bolton's deep voice came booming out of the low air-less room. Through the crack of the door Jane could see that she was a big woman, and that she handled the heavy iron as though it were a feather.

"Look at 'er," she said fiercely, indicating the baby with a jerk of her head, and frowning darkly at Martin. "Frettin' 'er little 'eart out for yer. Take 'er out and wheel 'er in the go-cart, and don't worrit me to let you go to that there museum again. It's all foolishness, that's wot it is." She attacked a filmy ruffle so savagely that Jane drew in her breath with a gasp, and then marched courageously into the room, closely followed by a very shrinking Sylvia.

"Well, wot can I do for you?" demanded Mrs. Bolton crossly, never once pausing in the guidance of her capable iron through the delicate intricacies of lace and muslin.

"Why we—I—my friend"—stammered Jane, losing all her beautiful confidence and self-possession, "my friend wants to—to——" she smiled appealingly, and went backward a step as though the open door were calling her strongly.

Sylvia, appalled by Jane's sudden panic, and left in the foreground by the unexpected retreat, was in despair. For an instant escape seemed the only thing possible. She knew she could never talk to the



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

woman. Then she steadied herself by looking at Martin, who, with his small face set in sober resignation, had tied a cap on the fat baby, and was bracing his slight figure to the task of lifting her from the high-chair.

"I've been talking to Martin," Sylvia began bravely, "and I hope ——"

"Ain't I told you never to talk to strangers?" demanded Mrs. Bolton, setting down her iron with a bang, and glaring first at the visitors, then at Martin. She took a step toward him looking so fierce that Jane unconsciously uttered a little cry, but Martin did not stir. He just stood there with a protective arm across the front of the baby's chair, and a smile hovering about his mouth.

"Say," he said serenely, "you're making 'em think you're awful cross to me. And she isn't," he turned eagerly to Sylvia; "she lets me go to the museum and the libry, and she gave me five cents just the other day to ride in the swan-boats."

Mrs. Bolton screwed up her face oddly, and for an instant Jane fancied she might be wanting either to cry or laugh. Then she gathered the baby into her strong arms. "'Aven't I told yer before this not to lift Cereal? She's too 'eavy for yer."

Sylvia gave a little squeak of surprise. "What did you call her?" she asked, for some reason not feeling afraid any more.



## Martin Joy

“ ‘Cereal.’ It’s one of Bolton’s fancies. ’E worked for a grocer about that time, and ’e liked the sound of the name. ’E’s got an ear for music, Bolton ’as.” As she finished speaking Mrs. Bolton lifted the go-cart up the short flight of steps, returned for the baby and deposited her in it with a force that would have disturbed a less substantial infant, and then gave Martin a push toward out-of-doors which he rewarded with one of his fleeting smiles.

“ Did you ever see such a goose as I am ? ” Jane whispered when she and Sylvia were alone for an instant. “ I thought I was going to be so affable and easy, but I was just petrified by the glare she turned on me. You’re a perfect wonder,” and then silence fell at the sound of returning footsteps.

“ There,” said Mrs. Bolton, striding into the room again, and picking an iron off the stove, “ ain’t ’e a lamb if there ever was one ? ”

“ He ? ” said Sylvia, losing the last remnant of her shyness in her surprise. “ I thought the baby was a girl.”

“ So she is. I’m talkin’ of the boy. ’E don’t belong to me, but we’ve ’ad ’im since ’e was about two. It was the first week we come to this street, when we was just married ”—Mrs. Bolton’s eyes grew reminiscent, and her voice softened—



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“that I ’appened to step out one day and saw ’is pore mother clingin’ to the fence of that big ’ouse at the end of the street with ’im beside ’er. She was jest slidin’ to the ground when I got my arms ’round ’er. She died in two days without ever bein’ able to say one word about ’erself, but you could tell she was a lady all right. Jest once—when she was most gone—she opened ’er big brown eyes, and said kind of glad and surprised-like, ‘Why, Martin—why, Martin Joy.’ So Bolton said the child ’ad to be called that.”

“And didn’t you ever find out anything about them?” Jane in her interest advanced a step nearer.

“Not a word. The doctor, ’e tried, and the city officers, they tried, but ’twasn’t no use. And me and Bolton was willin’ to take ’im. This world’s all change, I say. When we come ’ere there wasn’t a fambly on the block that’d been ’ere five years before, and by now they’ve mostly changed again. I don’t ’low Martin to speak to many of ’em. ’E’s too good for ’em.” She finished with a violent lunge at a lace-trimmed ruffle which ought to have left a hole, but didn’t.

“I wouldn’t ’ave ’im know ’ow much I think of ’im,” she went on a little consciously. “I’m bound to bring ’im up right, and men-folks, even when they’re boys, ’as to be kept under.”



## Martin Joy

Sylvia, who had just glanced hastily at her watch, was in despair at the way time was slipping away. "Do you suppose, Mrs. Bolton, you could let me take Martin to Belhaven to stay a few days with me?" she asked. "I'll take great care of him, and he wants so much to see the country."

Mrs. Bolton grew alarmingly red in the face, and her iron worked as though it had a special grudge against the garment it was undertaking. At last she looked up with an unmistakable air of relief. "I've always been dreading some un would want to take 'im and that it'd be for 'is good," she said slowly. "But I don't see as there's any call for me to let 'im go with you when I don't know anythink about you."

The justice of this was so evident that the girls looked at each other in consternation.

"Of course it wouldn't help any to tell you that she is Sylvia Browning, and I'm Jane Stuart, and we live in Belhaven, and every one knows us," said Jane, trying to think out the matter as she talked. "At this moment I can't think of a soul I know in this city except Aunt Caroline."

"Well, I don't know 'er," began Mrs. Bolton with increasing cheerfulness, but at that moment, as though Aunt Caroline's name held magic power, there was the sound of a clear whistle, and of some one running hastily down the steps.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Mis' Eliot forgot these when she sent the others," a fresh-faced young man said, dropping a bundle on the chair, and then his eyes opened very wide as he surveyed the two girls who were looking at him with equal astonishment.

"Why, it's Webb," exclaimed Jane delightedly. "Isn't that the most wonderful thing? He's my aunt's chauffeur, Mrs. Bolton, and he can tell you we're all right. We want to take the little boy to Belhaven with us, Webb, and, of course, Mrs. Bolton couldn't let us without knowing us."

"No, Miss Jane, of course not. I've just been talking to the little chap outside, and he's been telling me how he wanted to see the country. I was wishing he could get the chance."

Jane noticed that this man's voice, also, held a certain eagerness in speaking of Martin. "Just as if he couldn't help liking him," she said to herself.

"If you'd like, Miss Jane," Webb went on, "I've nothing more to do for Mrs. Eliot now, and I'm sure she'd be glad to have me take you to the station."

"That will be perfectly fine," Jane answered with an anxious look at Mrs. Bolton, whose only response was a heavy sigh and an increase of activity with her iron.

Suddenly she set it on the stove with a thump,



## Martin Joy

and turned toward the door. "I don't know what Bolton will say when 'e comes 'ome," she muttered forlornly, and then raising her voice, "you, Martin, come 'ere."

As though he had been longing for the summons the boy ran down the steps and into the room, looking eagerly from one to the other. And then without a word he was seized and washed and brushed, and shaken into a clean blouse with a force that made his teeth chatter. The girls watched with some anxiety, but Martin seemed to take it as a matter of course, and once, in a moment of silent ecstasy, put his hand softly on Mrs. Bolton's cheek; an attention which made that fiery woman swallow hard, and tie his little neck-tie as if she were about to choke him.

Sylvia, hanging back a little as the others went up the steps, put something into Mrs. Bolton's hand. "It's for the baby," she explained, all at once so painfully shy that Mrs. Bolton felt obliged to restrain her own feelings. "She's—she's such a darling," she went on, "and I thought perhaps you'd like to get some one else to take her out while Martin is away. Oh, please don't make me take it back ——" and Sylvia fled into the waiting automobile.

"You take care of 'im. 'E ain't so awful strong," Mrs. Bolton called, and when they turned



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

the corner they could see her, still gazing after them, one hand shading her eyes, like a massive statue.

As it often happened, there was no chance for them to sit together on the train, and Martin Joy was tucked in beside a stout man, with Jane in the seat behind, and Sylvia across the aisle. Before long the boy, lulled by the motion of the train, put his head back and slept.

Jane, having nothing else to do, entertained herself by watching Sylvia, who in her turn was gazing at Martin in a wholly absorbed and thoughtful way, and seemed quite oblivious of everything else. Once she got up abruptly, stepped across to Jane's seat and spoke softly.

"Jane, do you know whether any one has rented the house your aunt spoke of? The one that is near Rivercroft?"

"No, not yet. But some one will if Aunt Caroline puts her mind on it. Why do you want to know?"

But Sylvia had slipped back into her seat again, and was once more lost in thought, a condition which lasted in greater or less degree for the remainder of the journey. Jane kept up a lively chatter with Martin while they were driving home in the station carriage, but Sylvia's eyes were looking far away, and she sat like a statue, with the



## Martin Joy

wind blowing her hair about her face, and now and then a wistful smile curving her lips. Jane somehow felt that there were secrets in the air, and regretted that with Sylvia one did not ask, but waited to be told.

It was a relief, therefore, when the next day Sylvia, looking tired, but, nevertheless, supremely happy, walked into the library where Mrs. Stuart was having a twilight talk with her family.

Jane jumped up at once with a rapturous greeting. "Sylvia Browning, we're so glad to see you, and how's your little borrowed brother? Why, Sylvy, your eyes shine like stars, and that blue dress is the most becoming thing you wear. Sit down here beside mother, and tell us all about Martin."

"I came alone, but it isn't really dark yet," Sylvia said first, answering the unspoken question in Mrs. Stuart's eyes. "Miss Brown is putting Martin to bed, and they're having the time of their lives." She had dropped down on the sofa by this time, and taken one of Mrs. Stuart's slim hands in both her own. "Oh, little Mother Stuart, I've got such a plan. I hardly dare——"

"For goodness' sake, tell it—tell it," begged Judy, falling over Sylvia's feet in her eagerness.

"Jud-ee!" Jane's reproof was prompt, but her tone lacked conviction, for she was bubbling over with curiosity herself.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Well, then," began Sylvia hastily, "I want to borrow Martin for all summer. And do you think Mrs. Eliot would mind if I rent that house, and take the Prescotts and Pansy O'Brien, and perhaps Peter?" She poured out the plan in which she had been absorbed since the day before, as though the sympathy of these friends was all that was needed to make it quite perfect.

"You see, Brownie wants to go back to her home for this summer, so I can't have her. And Hilda Prescott thinks they'd love to do it," Sylvia hurried on. "That woman means to be good to Martin, but she lets him do things he isn't strong enough for. Brownie asked Dr. Reed to look him over, and he says Martin ought not to take care of that heavy baby. So you see he really shouldn't go back there, should he?" She cast an appealing glance around the little circle, and rested her gaze on Donald, whose face had kindled at her words.

"He's a dandy little chap, and I'll help out any way I can," he responded heartily.

"Likewise," murmured David. "And I solemnly promise to hunt Pansy every time she gets lost." Which cheerful bit of heroism counted for much, for every one knew Pansy's unconquerable yearning to explore the unknown.

"It's a perfectly lovely plan, and I'm glad as



## Martin Joy

I can be, but Sylvy, we want you in our party at Aunt Caroline's house." Jane's dismay was unmistakable.

"That's selfish, Jane," said Judy, evening up for the reproof recently administered to her.

Sylvia laughed. "It gives me a nice little warm feeling in my heart, Judy, to have Jane selfish in that way," she said happily. "But you needn't think I'm not going to belong to your party, for I am. You and Carol and Molly and I are to be visiting sisters, and Hilda and Mr. Prescott will live in the house and manage it all."

"What does your guardian say to all this?" inquired Mrs. Stuart, hating to dampen this newly-born enthusiasm, but feeling a little responsible.

"Hilda and I went into town the first thing this morning, and I told him my whole idea. He said I could go ahead and make my plans. Then we went to see Mrs. Bolton."

"What! You've really seen her again?" queried Jane, opening her eyes very wide.

"Yes," nodded the other girl triumphantly. "I thought she was my biggest difficulty, and I wanted to get her over with. She must have taken a fancy to Hilda, for she wasn't half so fierce as she was yesterday. I'm quite sure she's glad that Martin's going to have this chance, though, of course, she wouldn't say so."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Sylvia got up from the sofa, and stood looking down at Mrs. Stuart and Jane with a lovely light in her eyes ; a creature so different from the sad, silent girl they had first known it was hard to remember that other.

"I must run home," she said. "Could you possibly go with me on Monday, Mrs. Stuart, and we'll see about renting the house, and buy some clothes for Martin. He's such a darling. He's talked to every animal he's seen, and made friends with the flowers and trees."

"Did you ever see any one more happy?" said Jane, as she and the two boys walked home through the soft, starlit darkness after leaving Sylvia at her own door. "Goodness, it must be nice to be able to spend so much money on other people."

"Not a bit nicer than to make them feel all warm and comfortable in their hearts, as Sylvia says. I know some people who are always doing that," answered Don, and tucked his cousin's hand under his arm.

"Do you?" queried Jane with apparent innocence, but she knew very well what Don meant, and felt comforted.

As Jane said afterward, it was hard during the next four weeks to behave as though school and every-day life were more important than anything



## Martin Joy

else when, in the bottom of one's mind, there was something so much more exciting to think about. In their free moments there was always a discussion under way either in regard to Rivercroft or Silver House, as Pansy O'Brien had named the house to which her dear Miss Sylvia was to take her. It was a relief to Jane to have the question of Molly and Stan settled, though deep in her heart she thought the latter took his invitation too much for granted, and hardly seemed grateful enough for the privilege held out to him.

"He acts as though he thought we wanted him for his own dear sake," she said privately to David, "when actually ——"

"Simmer down, Mrs. Janes, and forget it," her twin answered soothingly. "Molly's a dandy, anyway, and sometimes—I more than half believe that's Stan's way of—well, of covering up what he really feels."

"Fudge! I wish he'd get a new way, then," said Jane, frowning, and then she suddenly remembered the insistent cordiality of her invitation to Stanley. "Goodness! Isn't it easy to fall into traps you make yourself?" she ended, and David, having no key to the situation, looked after her perplexedly as she went up-stairs.

This year the twins' fifteenth birthday, which they achieved on the eighteenth of June, made



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

scarcely more than a ripple of excitement, for that was the day when the first detachment of the summer party started off: Hilda and her grandfather, Sylvia, Susan Trot and Mr. Chope, and last, and of most evident importance, Martin Joy and the two O'Brien children.

"It seems as if a large chunk had gone out of the town with Sylvia away," lamented Carol. She had been taking birthday supper with the Stuarts, and the twins were seeing her home.

"Talk about chunks! What do you think about our family with Susan and Mr. Chope gone? We feel as if—as if the very foundations of Belhaven were tottering," remarked David feelingly.

"Hear! Hear!" said Jane. "Poor little Spinksy; you'll be going yourself in another week. And there's so much to do with school closing and all, that we shan't have time to think."

They had reached Carol's house by this time, and Jane leaned wearily against her brother as they paused at the foot of the steps.

"Stop for me in the morning, Carol, if you're in any kind of season. And, Spinksy, please get me home as soon as you can; I'm so sleepy I don't know whether I can walk or not."

"That's a nice compliment for your guest," Carol called after them as they plunged into the



## Martin Joy

darkness, but only the sound of Jane's laughter came back in response.

"Wake up, Mrs. Janes, and face your sixteenth year," David said solemnly, after they had walked three-quarters of the way home without speaking.

"Why did you wake me? I was walking in my sleep," murmured Jane, giving herself a little shake. "And I won't think about sixteen yet. I'm only fifteen."

"I don't care. So long as you're my twin you've got to think about the year we're beginning, and wish us good luck and the best yet." David had certain customs of his own to which he adhered with great tenacity, and Jane knew she might as well give in.

"All right," she yawned, looking around first to see if any one were coming behind them, and then giving him her hand. "Here's hoping—our—sixteenth—year—will be—the best—yet. Mercy! my arm feels like a pump-handle."

A man passed them as she finished speaking, and Jane walked a little closer to David, and dropped her voice for a sentence or two. "I hope he didn't see that. He'll think we're crazy."

"He couldn't see much in this darkness, and what you said was all right. Anyway it looks as



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though we're going to begin our year with a peach of a summer, doesn't it, Mrs. Janes?"

"I should say so. Everything seems to be going just right. There isn't a single blot on it except Stan——" the sudden pressure of David's arm made her bite off the last word sharply just as two people came out of the darkness behind them and spoke a good-evening in passing.

"I'm—I'm so scared," Jane whispered a moment later as she and David went up the front steps. "How could you tell it was Mr. Oliver and Stanley?"

"I couldn't. But I heard some one; and I didn't know what you might be going to say, so I pinched on principle."

"Wasn't it just like me to say it at that moment?" moaned Jane. "And I was so cheerful and—and loud about it. That's a nice way to begin my sixteenth year, isn't it? Oh, Spinksy, do you really suppose he heard?"

"By Jingo, I hope not." And then, as he saw his sister's face under the hall light, David added quickly, "Probably he didn't, after all."

"Oh, I'm afraid he did, and don't you see what an awful box it puts me in?" demanded Jane, whose mind had gone ahead to future possibilities. "I'm—partly, at least, his hostess, and I've said something horrid about my guest, and I can't



## Martin Joy

apologize, because, perhaps, he didn't hear me. Oh, Spinksy, what am I going to do?"

"Go to bed and forget it. And tell mother to-morrow morning and not to-night, as I know you're planning to," and David successfully dogged his twin's footsteps, until he saw her safely into her own room.

Not far away, Stanley, who had finished the walk home in silence, rushed up-stairs without a word to his sister. He had heard the whole of Jane's remark, and had caught enough of David's to know what it all meant.

"I won't go," he said angrily, striding over to the window, and staring into the darkness. "Why did she ask me if she didn't want me? I wish the Stuarts had never come to Belhaven." And then, by some trick of the imagination, Mrs. Stuart's face, smiling, motherly, tender, rose before him and made him take back his wish. "A girl like Jane couldn't be friends with a—a coward," he meditated despondently. "She'll never forget that about me."

He turned away from the window and got ready for bed. His mind ran on in a confusion of resentment and discouragement. "I'll beg father to let me go somewhere else," he thought at last, as he put out his light. "Jane needn't have asked me, and I don't care what she thinks of me." And



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then a minute later, he was telling himself involuntarily that there was something about Jane's straightforwardness and good-comradeship which made her liking well worth having. Sleep was long in coming to Stanley that night.



## CHAPTER IV

### TINKLE SISTERS

DURING the last week in Belhaven Jane felt as though she walked on air, and came down only once in a while to touch the high places. There were so many exciting things to think about. Chief among them the closing festivities at the High School with Molly and Rob both graduates. Rob was the youngest member of the class, and Jane could not help wondering if, with college just ahead, he would think that she and David were too young for him.

On the afternoon before their departure the Ninepin Club gave a strawberry party in Serena Holt's garden, with the twilight of a perfect June day changing softly into evening and moonlight. Jane wished that she might take them all to Rivercroft, these girls and boys who had given her so much happiness. She tried to make out their faces in the dusk as they sat singing, and all at once the moonlight touched Stanley and brought out the hurt, resentful expression he so often wore. Jane stopped singing for a moment, and tried not to look



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at the clear-cut, boyish face, and was glad when the moonlight shifted.

\* \* \* \* \*

The early sunlight was streaming through the east window when Jane stirred uneasily in bed and pulled open her sleepy eyes with visible effort. Everything looked strange to her, and she sat up and stared around the airy chamber with its rose-tinted walls, its white furniture, and the sleeping girl in the bed near her own.

"You're really here, Jane," she said to herself, as she slipped quietly out of bed. "This is Rivercroft, and that's Carol, and, unless it's all a dream, Molly and Sylvia are snoozing in the next room. I'm going out. I can't stay in bed another minute."

In the midst of dressing she paused and looked doubtfully at the occupant of the other bed. "I wonder if she'll mind if I go without saying anything," she questioned. Then softly, "Carol! Carol! I'm going to explore. Do you want to come?"

A groan of exasperation, and a deeper burrowing of the dark head into the pillow, was the only answer, but it was a sufficiently definite one.

Ten minutes later Jane tiptoed softly into the hall. When they arrived the night before she had been so tired that everything had grown wavy



## Tinkle Sisters

before her sleepy eyes, and now she hadn't an idea which of the rooms belonged to her mother and which to Aunt Caroline. "Anyway," she meditated, studying the closed doors, "I know that the boys are in the third story, and nothing would pull them out of bed at this hour. I guess it's up to me to go exploring all by my lonesome." She stole quietly down the stairs, and out through the wide front door, already flung open to the spicy morning air.

"Um-um, but this smells good," she said half-aloud, beginning to take in deep breaths, and feeling a little strange and alone in spite of herself.

"Pretty girl! Good-morning," volunteered a cracked voice startingly near her, and she turned with a jump to find a gay-colored parrot regarding her with head on one side. "Pretty girl love Cora?" the queer voice asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, you gorgeous bird. I've heard about you before." Jane went up to the cage, and stood there making kissing sounds to which the parrot listened with apparent thoughtfulness.

"Nice boy love Cora?" she demanded suddenly, sidling along her perch, and stretching her neck to look beyond Jane.

"I'm a girl," Jane corrected, but a sleepy voice interrupted her, and she turned quickly to see Rob just getting out of a hammock.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"She means me," he explained, and then tried to smile in his usual good-natured way, but an irrepressible yawn spoiled the effect. "Looked at my watch wrong—thought I'd get a rise out of the other fellows by leaving 'em asleep—joke all on me," he went on jerkily. "I should have had another nap down here, but that bird's been so confoundedly talky. I was afraid she'd get mad and scream if I didn't humor her. And every time I tried to leave the piazza she'd say 'don't go' as if her heart were broken."

A swift mental picture of Rob keeping awake to converse politely with a parrot made Jane feel that the day had begun joyously, but she did not dare to laugh aloud at this hour of the morning.

"Come on and play with me," she said, repressing a giggle. "Let's explore. You don't want to go to sleep now, do you?"

"No-o, but I'd give my last dime for something to eat."

"Cora want a cracker," remarked the parrot plaintively.

"Well, keep still about it. That's what you've been saying for the last hour, and it only makes me more ravenous to hear about juicy refreshing things like crackers."

"Shut up!" remarked the uncanny bird rudely, as if she suspected she was being made fun of.



## Tinkle Sisters

And then in her most wheedlesome voice, "Pretty girl love Cora?"

"I should say I do. You're a wonder. You see, Rob, what it is to have the fatal gift of beauty. You can stand in even with parrots."

"Fiddlesticks! Until you came she'd been calling me 'pretty boy' all the time, so you can tell she's no judge. But come on, Lady Jane. Let's explore, and if you have any idea where a starving person can find even a crumb of bread, divulge it or see me fall fainting at your feet."

"Mercy! Is it as bad as that? I don't quite dare to go foraging here." Jane turned to look at the house they were leaving, and an involuntary frown wrinkled her forehead. "Did you ever see a more spick and span house, Rob? It makes me feel like best clothes and afternoon teas, and I should never guess it was anywhere near the real woods."

"Well, it is, thank goodness, and unless I miss my guess, your Uncle Stephen will take the boys out camping."

"Well, I want you to understand that the boys can't go a step without the girls." In her defiance Jane half turned, and looked as though she were going back to drag Uncle Stephen from his peaceful slumbers, and demand equal rights.

"There, there, come on, and don't get huffy this



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

beautiful, sunshiny morning when all the little birds are agreeing in their little nests. It's enough to have one grouchy person in the party."

"You mean Stan? Wasn't he a thunder-cloud at the station yesterday?"

"Ned Holt said that Stan didn't want to come, but his father made him."

"I haven't had a chance to speak to him for a week," Jane answered soberly, struck by the instant conviction that she could explain Stanley's state of mind, but not in the least wanting to.

"Say, where are we going now?"

"I don't know. I'm exploring. What are you doing?"

"Same as you are. I wish we could find the other house and Susan Trot. She'd give us something to eat."

"Susan Trot! I never knew before how beautiful that name could sound. It makes me think of bread and butter, and doughnuts and cookies. Come on, let's hurry."

They had left the rolling, well-kept land, which evidently belonged to Rivercroft, and were striking across the fields, beyond which were trees, thickly planted.

"This ought to be the right direction," panted Jane, running a little to keep up. "There's the east over there where the sun is, and Uncle Stephen



## Tinkle Sisters

said Silver House was about three-quarters of a mile southwest of Rivercroft."

"Wonderful intelligence—for a girl."

"Anyway, I know enough to tell time, and to get out of the way of a parrot when it is too noisy for me." Jane's laugh rang out joyously. "I believe I shall call you Don Quixote after this. Mother has been reading to Spinksy and me about him, and somehow you make me think of him this morning. I hope you don't mind."

"Not a bit. He's a friend of mine," grinned Rob, who was as great a reader as David. "Only I shall be peeved if you think I look like the pictures of him. Say, isn't that a white house shining through the trees? Now, which is the kitchen end?"

"Are you sure that's the one? It would be perfectly awful to go sneaking around where a perfect stranger lives." Jane, in sudden panic, stopped half-way over a stone wall to gaze perplexedly at the house they were approaching.

"Why, of course. You can't make any mistake when houses are so scarce as they are in this region. Come on, I'll help you."

"You don't have to." Jane landed with a springy bounce on the ground. "Go ahead and find out. Anyway it doesn't look a bit the way they described it."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Rob started around the house with so confident a manner that Jane plucked up courage and followed. She was just thinking that it was a useful-looking house, and that that was all one could say about it, when, suddenly, from somewhere not far away, came the rattling of a chain, and a loud, threatening bark.

Jane couldn't help giving a stifled scream, and, at the sound, there were two shrill shrieks inside the house, and a window near her was cautiously pushed up. Turning quickly, she found herself gazing directly into two terrified faces, and even in this first glance realized that one of the women was tall and exceedingly thin; the other correspondingly short and stout.

"Don't go a step nearer that frightful animal!"

"He's ch-chained, but it might break!"

"Sister told Mr. Jones not to leave him."

"But we did hear such queer noises in the night."

These remarks were flung tremulously out of the window, and each time the chain rattled the two sisters cringed and clutched each other. From the other side of the house came still more terrifying noises from the unseen animal, which was evidently excited by the sound of voices.

"I'm going to see what he looks like," said Rob, taking a sudden step forward, but Jane, looking



## Tinkle Sisters

rather pale, grabbed him by the arm. "Please don't go," she begged. "If he gets so furious just hearing us there's no knowing what he'd do if he saw you."

"He's a perfect monster," said the stout sister. "As big as—as a baby elephant, I do believe."

"Perhaps if we should go away he'd get quiet again," Jane suggested helpfully, and began to edge away from the window.

"Oh, I beg of you to stay," implored the thin sister. "You don't know how good you look to us. Mr. Jones will be here soon, and will take that awful beast away."

"He brings us the milk. Sister told him not to leave it," the fat sister repeated sadly. "We've taken turns keepin' awake all night, for fear he'd end up by murderin' some one. And now till he comes we dasn't go out to the well or the hen-house."

"You're all mixed up, Lily, between Mr. Jones and the dog and the milk," said the tall sister with a twinkling smile that won Jane's heart. "I was just sayin' that as the hen-house and the well are on this side of the house I might get out of the winder if I was sure Mr. Jones wouldn't come and catch me at it."

"Let me get the water and eggs for you," Rob offered promptly. Even the mention of something



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

to eat and drink filled him with a longing difficult to conceal.

"You're city folks, ain't you?" the thin sister asked wistfully as Rob departed with basket and pail. "I knew you were—or near it, the minute I laid eyes on you," she went on when Jane had told her where she lived. "We live in the city, too. We're 'Tinkle Sisters.'"

Jane tried to look intelligent, wondered wildly whether she ought to know who they were, and got out of the dilemma by mentioning her own name and Rob's.

"Sister's Miss Tinkle, and I'm Lily," explained the stout sister. "We keep a notion shop. It used to have Pa's name over the door, but now women are so up and comin' we've got a new black and g-gold sign with 'T-Tinkle Sisters'—on—it."

To Jane's dismay the sisters threw their arms around each other, and she heard actual sobs, and ejaculations of "Oh, Sister!" "Oh, Lily!"

"It's so-o lonesome here," sniffed Miss Lily Tinkle turning to Jane, and dabbing her eyes with a corner of her apron. "Where we live the 'lectrics go right by the store, and there's a cross-town line at the corner, and the elevated on the next street."

"And there's hand-organs and street bands," put in Miss Tinkle, "and hundreds of people goin'



## Tinkle Sisters

by our shop or comin' in." She paused as though the recollection of city joys was too much for her; then added with a sigh, "This sort of a sinkin'-in hush that settles down on you in the evenin' weighs a ton. It gets on my nerves dreadfully."

Miss Lily shuddered. "I ain't had a night's sleep since we got here a week ago. And the worst of it is that we hear all sorts of little creepy sounds that might be anythin'. That's why Mr. Jones insisted on havin' us take the dog."

At this moment there was a crash of the chain, and a violent barking, as though the intelligent animal on the other side of the house had heard himself mentioned, and resented being talked about. Jane looked apprehensively in the direction of the sound and hoped that the fastenings were strong. As she turned back again she caught a glimpse of Rob just starting for the house.

"Why—why do you live here if you don't like it?" she inquired vaguely, her mind still on the dog.

"Our aunt left us this place, and we made up our minds we'd try it for a month," answered Miss Tinkle firmly. "And havin' told everybody, and left some one in our store, we ain't goin' back on it if it kills us. But after that——"

"Yes, after that," reiterated Miss Lily, but what



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

was to happen in the future Jane did not hear, for the events of the present became of vital interest.

The dog, hearing Rob's footsteps before they were audible to any one else, barked furiously and made a succession of strong leaps. There was a sound of splintering wood, and then Jane, too paralyzed to run, saw a huge animal shoot around the corner of the house, felt the impact of his clumsy paws on her shoulders, and with a little shriek went over backward on the soft grass. Instinctively she shut her eyes, but opened them the next instant to find herself held fast by one enormous paw, while a great, stupid, anxious face looked into her own. At the same moment Rob dashed wildly on to the scene, and with a cry of alarm jumped for the dog's collar.

"He's only a young dog, and I'm not hurt a mite," declared Jane, springing up when Rob had succeeded in pulling the dog away. "Hold him, Rob, and I'll try to find some other place to fasten the chain. He isn't cross; he's just lonesome."

"It's all—very—well to say—'hold him,'" panted Rob, dancing around wildly in his effort to keep the playful animal from walking all over him in his mad desire for affection.

"Oh, how brave! How wonderfully heroic!" Miss Lily Tinkle clasped her plump hands, and leaned out of the window just in-time to divert



## Tinkle Sisters

the dog's attention for an instant, and make him lunge at her with ineffectual clumsiness. "Oo-ouch! Hold him! He's comin' in!"

By this time Jane had managed to fasten the snap on the end of the chain into a heavy ring screwed into the house; a task of some difficulty, as the spirited infant was seeking all the time for some one upon whom to lavish his caresses.

"There, unless the house goes he's fastened now for keeps," she gasped, sitting down just out of reach of the chain to get her breath. "Oh, the poor little thing! See how unhappy he looks."

"Little thing!" exploded Rob. "He's as big as a young calf. He almost pulled my arms out by the roots."

Jane laughed so unfeelingly that Miss Lily Tinkle was afraid Rob's feelings would be hurt. "It was so brave of you," she said with great seriousness. "You couldn't tell, of course, that he wasn't as old as he is big, though I can see now that his face looks real young, can't you, Sister?"

"Yes," agreed Miss Tinkle, "I can. And now I wish you'd come in and take breakfast with us. We had it about ready when you came, and we'd just love to have your company."

"Oh, thank you very much, but we must go home to breakfast," Jane said hastily. "You see, they don't know where we are."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“And neither do we,” added Rob, trying to conceal his sorrow over having to refuse food under an appearance of light-heartedness. “I wonder if you know any house not far away where a Miss Prescott and some children have been living for a week.”

“Yes, we do.” It was Miss Lily Tinkle who was answering now, her sister having left the window. “It’s about half a mile east of us.”

“I always mean east when I say west,” Jane giggled. “Southeast was what Uncle Stephen said.”

“You’re a nice guide,” began Rob, trying to look severe. “Catch me trusting your bump of location again. I’m going to ——” and then something at the window caught his attention, and the severity of his gaze relaxed. Just for an instant he felt afraid that it was a mirage like those seen by the thirsty traveler on the desert; then he realized gratefully that a tray was balanced on the window sill, and that a smiling person behind it was speaking.

“If you really won’t stay,” Miss Tinkle said kindly, “I just wish you’d take a little something to eat; you’ve been through so much for us.”

Rob said afterward that if Jane had refused that time their friendship would have been broken forever. He had a momentary impulse to go down



## Tinkle Sisters

on his knees and implore her to take one of those luscious doughnuts. What if she had some foolish idea about not eating before she had her breakfast!

"Thank you so much," Jane said. "I can't resist such delicious-looking bread and butter as that. Do try a doughnut, Rob. Mercy! That sigh of relief almost blew me away."

"Have some honey on your bread," suggested Miss Lily. "Or some of this strawberry jam. Shall I put jam or honey on yours, Mr.—Mr. Robert?"

"Honey, thank you," murmured Rob so sweetly that Jane insisted afterward, to his great embarrassment, that he made it sound like a pet name.

"If you'll excuse us," Jane said a few moments later, "I believe we'd better eat our doughnuts as we go along, for I'm afraid it's getting late."

"It's half-past six," said Miss Tinkle; "that isn't late, and we do hate to have you go."

"I'll come again and bring mother and the girls—if you'll let me."

"Let you!" breathed Miss Lily, clasping her hands rapturously. "My dear, p'raps we'd get so we'd like this if we could see some folks."

"The boys will stroll around, too. They'd love to know any one who makes such good doughnuts."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Rob said this with all the fervor of one whose dearest wish has been satisfied. "Good-bye, puppy," he added, giving the dog a pat when he wasn't looking, and then jumping hastily out of reach.

"Well, Don Quixote," Jane said, as they took their way back to the road and started east, "you tilted at a windmill that time, didn't you? Just a nice innocent baby dog that wanted to love everybody."

"Jiminy! He didn't look the part when I came 'round the corner and saw him standing over you," Rob answered grimly. "That was one bad scare for me, Mrs. Janes."

"I saw you coming and knew you'd do something," Jane said with a serene confidence that pleased Rob, though he tried not to show it. "Anyway I'm not going to call you Don Quixote any more because—well, it doesn't fit. It was brave of you, for that dog might have been fierce."

"Oh, pooh; just a 'nice, innocent baby dog,'" quoted Rob with a chuckle. "Say, I bet we've struck the right way now."

They had started along a shady bit of road that wandered up a hill, and just over the crest of the hill one could see the top of a house and barn. A stone wall followed one side of the road, and on the other side of the wall there were trees, and



## Tinkle Sisters

patches of sunshine and shadow, and a wealth of ferns and wild-flowers.

As they walked along Jane had the queer feeling of having been there before, though she knew she never had. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask Rob if it looked familiar to him, but just then they reached the top of the hill, and went rapidly toward the house which already seemed to be beginning a lively sort of day.

There was the sound of a clear whistle, and around the corner of the house came Frederick Prescott with a ladder over one shoulder and a hammer in his hand. At his heels were three children, Martin Joy, Pansy O'Brien and her small brother Peter. Susan Trot opened the kitchen door at almost the same moment, and from one of the windows up-stairs Hilda waved a joyous greeting. A little way back of the house Mr. Chope, and Kenneth, who had begged to live with the Prescotts, were coming through the tall grass with fishing-tackle and a string of fish.

"Doesn't it seem just like a moving picture to have them appearing that way?" Jane stopped for an instant to take it all in, and the next moment the children had seen the newcomers, and were racing toward them. Rob made a dash for fat Peter and set him on his shoulder. Martin Joy slipped a brown hand into Jane's and gazed



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

at her and Rob with an expression of great content. It was such a friendly world for Martin nowadays.

"This is the real—realest country," chirped Pansy, flying around to capture Jane's other hand. "My girl has been over here this morning, and one—two—four, six, ten other people."

"Who was here?" Jane turned to Hilda who came up just then looking very fresh and pretty in a pink and white gown. "Perhaps we're not the only ones smart enough to get up early."

"Pansy's ideas of number are a trifle hazy," Hilda explained. " Sylvia said she looked out of her window just in time to see you and Rob starting, and she supposed you were coming here. When she got down-stairs she found Stan looking as if he didn't know what to do with himself, so she brought him along."

"Do you suppose we could catch up with them if we go along now?" Jane asked with sudden eagerness. It seemed to her, all at once, that this morning, of all others, she might be able to make friends with Stanley, and start the summer right. Down underneath everything Jane wanted to be liked, and hated to feel that any one had a cause of offense against her.

"I'm afraid not. Sylvia hurried because she thought they'd be late for breakfast."

"We'd better hurry, too. Good-bye, all. Ken,



## Tinkle Sisters

I think you're dreadful not to want to live with your own family. Come on, Rob. Aunt Caroline is very particular about having people on time for meals."

"Nice time for you to think about that," Rob grumbled, feeling that his reputation as a guest was imperiled.

Mr. Prescott and Martin walked to the crest of the hill to show them the shortest way.

"It's up the hill on this side, and down a little way on the other, and slantindicularly across the field," said Martin as he and Jane walked after the others. "Mr. Chope says you have to be p'ticular 'bout going slantindicular."

Jane laughed, and turned for a last look in the direction from which they had come, and again she was suddenly conscious of the feeling that this morning was not the first time she had walked over this road.

"Why is it," she said half to herself, and not at all with the expectation of a response from the small boy beside her, "why is it that I feel as if I'd been here before?"

"Don't you know?" Martin's brown eyes grew suddenly big and bright. "Can't you see it's lots like the road in our painting? Miss Sylvia and I knew it right away." He was silent for a moment, and then his whole face was wonderfully



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

alight. "I b'lieve it's a magic road," he went on dreamily, "where strange things happen. Only"—the glad expectancy of his expression changed to wistfulness, "only it didn't take me to a house where there were any relations."

"Oh, honey boy, don't you mind." Jane knelt on the grass beside the road, and put her arms around the slender little figure. "The summer has only just begun." And then, lest she should encourage him to hope for that which could not possibly happen, she added quickly, "We're all going to be your relations, Martin. Don't forget that."



## CHAPTER V

STAN

"For pity's sake, what's happening here?" demanded Jane, dropping on the ground beside Sylvia, who was sitting with her back against a tree listening with apparent amusement to a discussion going on near by.

"Why, the boys have just finished marking the court, and now Stanley insists they've done something they ought not to do, or haven't done what they should do, I don't know which. They're all against him, but he says he's seen the latest rules."

"Mind you, he hasn't done one stroke of the work." Carol, reposing in a hammock, sat up to regard the gesticulating boys. "Now I may be lazy—you all say I am—but at least I don't criticize when other people do the work."

"It's lucky you don't, Carol Heath." Jane's mind reverted at once to a grievance of her own. "Do you know why I'm so late in getting out here this morning? It's because I've been straightening your side of the room, and picking up the things you left on the floor—actually on



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

the floor. We've been here a week, and you've got steadily worse each day."

"Why worry?" Carol's calmness was exasperating. "You don't have to pick up my belongings. The maid will do it."

"I'm afraid she'll think they're mine, and that I haven't been well brought up," Jane said impulsively, not realizing how it was going to sound.

Carol flushed. "Evidently you haven't been used to a maid," she answered shortly.

"Not the kind of one that picks up my belongings," Jane confessed with great honesty, feeling that she had got only what she deserved. "I like to take care of my own room, though, sad to relate, I can't seem to keep my top bureau drawer in order." She ended with such a heartfelt sigh that Sylvia laughed, and the atmosphere cleared a little.

The girls were silent for a few minutes, Carol buried deep in the hammock, and Jane looking down at the little river which ran at the foot of the hill. Beyond the river were long stretches of rolling land, and then low hills; still farther away the hazy line of mountains lay against the sky. Jane's eyes, so keenly alive to beauty, drank in eagerly the fresh greenness of it all, and the wonder of sunshine and shadow.

"Come over and have a set, Jane," Rob called.



## Stan

"Stan says we may use the court even if we are a little off on some of the measurements. Good of him, isn't it?"

Jane, starting toward the court, noticed that Stanley sauntered off in another direction as she advanced. "Silly!" she said to herself disgustedly. "Does he think he's going to play hide-and-seek with me all summer the way he has this first week? I'll have it out with him before long, see if I don't."

"I'll have to go and get Molly. Those languid creatures under the tree won't play, I know," said Rob, starting toward the house.

"Spinksy, do you feel as though quarreling is—is in the air this morning?" demanded Jane when she and her twin were alone for a moment. "I went into the pantry for a drink of water, and I could hear the cook scolding about something and declaring she'd leave. Then, when I got out here, you boys were arguing, and I—well, I sailed into Carol." Jane ended abruptly, and stooped to pick up a stone which was lying in wait for a tennis-ball.

"Rob and I kept it up with Stan because it seemed so good to have him get up steam, and boss us a little. He's been in the doleful dumps, as Judy says, ever since we landed here."

"I know it," Jane said with a worried air.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"What's wrong with Carol?" David inquired after a little pause.

"Oh, nothing much. I guess I was bossy. You never really know all about people until you live in the house with them, do you? I wonder what she's found out about me." And then, leaving her twin in the bewildered state of mind to which he was quite accustomed, Jane turned to meet Molly and Rob.

The players were pretty evenly matched, but at the end of a long deuce set, Molly's fine service held the advantage her side had won. Jane threw down her racquet, and dropped on the bench which the boys had put up at the side of the court.

"You and I don't play well together, Robert Randall," she said decidedly. "You try to take everything that comes over the net, and then, if you lose anything, you say, 'Why, Jane, where were you?'"

"Well, that shows my unselfish, willing nature," chuckled Rob. "You certainly can't expect me to do all the work."

"No, and you can't expect me, just because I'm a girl, to let you try to cover the whole court, and then dance around behind you to take what you miss. I'm perfectly willing to do my share of the work, but I want to know what it is."



## Stan

"Hear! Hear!" murmured David admiringly.

"Methinks your remarks show some sense," Rob acknowledged with great good nature. "The next time I get into your receiving court whack me. Let's play another set and I'll show you how quickly I can reform."

"There isn't time before dinner. I just saw Mrs. Stuart waving from the piazza," said Sylvia, who with Carol had joined the players when the set ended.

"It's like life, isn't it?" began Molly dreamily, and then looked startled because they all laughed.

"Molly's mollyrizing—I mean moralizing again," David said with a chuckle. "Tell us what it is. We like large, serious thoughts on a warm July day."

"I was only thinking," said Molly with a pretense of hurt dignity, "that so many people go through life doing big, noticeable work, and leaving others to trot along behind to fill up the chinks."

"I'm going to have a note-book and label it 'Gems from Molly's Lips,'" declared Carol. "You won't catch me quarreling with any one who is kind enough to do most of the work. I'll give up my share any time."

"Come on," said Jane, getting up suddenly, and starting for the house. "Aunt Caroline hates to have us late."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"I'm so sleepy I can't see straight," she added a few moments later as they went up the steps.

"Same here." Rob was trying to conceal a prodigious yawn. "Jiminy! I hope I can keep awake through dinner without opening my mouth so wide. Even my hand isn't big enough to hide that."

"I don't wonder you feel tired and sleepy. You've both simply torn around this whole week from morning to night. I lose all my best naps because Jane gets up at such fiendishly early hours." Carol's voice sounded really aggrieved. "You'll spoil your complexion, Jane, if you play around in the sun all the time. My advice to you would be to take a nap after dinner."

"Oh, fudge! I never sleep in the daytime. I can't waste my time that way." Jane straightened her shoulders, and opened her eyes very wide as though by so doing she could throw off the veil of drowsiness that threatened to enfold her. "And if you like we can change roommates. I dare say Sylvia or Molly can put up with me."

"Well, they won't have a chance if I have any say about it. I guess not." Carol's impetuous embrace was so fiercely affectionate, and her change of mood so satisfying that Jane laughed and ran off up-stairs to get ready for dinner.

All the others were seated at the round table



## Stan

when she slipped into the vacant place between Rob and David. "I'm going to reform after this, and not be even almost late, Aunt Caroline," she murmured apologetically, trying her best to look less heavy-eyed than she felt.

"Jane, how you have burned your nose," said Judy, peering around from her seat beside Uncle Stephen to look at Jane, and by her remark focusing the gaze of the entire party on her sister. "It'll peel, and you'll look like a fright."

"Nothing like sisterly frankness." Jane tried to smile amiably, and at the same time to close one eye so that she might look at the afflicted feature, an attempt which delighted her friends.

"Grandmother, should you mind if I bring my camera to the table after this?" Donald asked pleadingly. "I'm afraid I shall lose some of Jane's lovely expressions."

"If Ken were only here you wouldn't dare to talk to me like that," Jane retorted. "He thinks I'm good-looking, anyway."

"It wouldn't do for us to say what we think." Uncle Stephen came to the rescue with great gallantry. "What's in the air for this afternoon, young people?"

"We're going over to Silver House and take Mr. Chope and Mr. Prescott fishing," David reported for the boys.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"And we're going to tag," announced Carol. "At least Molly and Sylvia and I are. Little Jane's been so busy this morning I haven't had a chance to ask her."

"Oh, I'll do what the rest do, of course, though I don't see the boys liking to have us tag if they really want to fish," Jane responded with a surprising lack of enthusiasm. By this time she was almost too sleepy to finish her dinner, and visions of a hammock, a sofa, or cool, soft grass under a tree came and went alluringly.

"That doesn't make any difference if we want to go," remarked Carol serenely. "I'm going to sit right beside Stanley, and let him bait my hook and take the fish off," she added. "He'll be so pleased."

Stanley, who had spoken hardly a word since dinner began, was obviously annoyed at being brought into notice. "I'm not going," he said shortly, and then Sylvia, who had seen Molly's face flush at the ungracious answer, changed the subject.

"Now, big children, nothing violent in the way of exercise for an hour, anyway," said Mrs. Stuart, coming out on the piazza with them after dinner. "This is the time to read or rest or talk."

"Girls, let's go up-stairs and have a gab-fest in our room," proposed Carol. "Come on, Sylvia and Molly. Why, where is Jane?"



## Stan

"I guess she's up there already. I saw her scoot back into the house the minute we all got out on the piazza," explained Judy, eyeing the older girls wistfully. It often seemed to her that there was an impassable gulf between twelve and fifteen which no one except herself was anxious to bridge.

"We'll find her, then." Molly started ahead, and then turned back. "Say, Judy, I'll come down and play a game of croquet with you before the others are ready to start, if you like."

"Oh, will you? You're an angel. I'll be right here waiting for you." Judy followed Molly with grateful eyes. Molly was a good deal older than the other girls, she was thinking, and yet she never made her feel like an insignificant little snip. "Perhaps when you get older you get younger," she said to herself, as she hurried to catch up with mother and Aunt Caroline, who were going to talk with the gardener.

In the meantime Jane, for a wonder not seen by any one, had fled through the hall, and out of another door, taking mother's steamer rug and a pillow she found on the broad couch. In one of her exploring tours she had noticed, not far from the house, a circle of pine trees within which the ground was softly carpeted with brown needles.

"I'll just stay there fifteen minutes, and they'll



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think I'm talking with mother," she was planning, as she hurried over the slippery, sloping ground toward the pines. "I shall never hear the last of it from Carol if she knows I've gone to take a nap."

It was the work of a moment to spread the steamer rug on the ground and stretch herself upon it. Through the crevices between the trees the sky was a cloudless blue; soft humming sounds filled the warm summer air.

"I believe Carol was right, and I do need to rest a little," she said to herself. "I've felt as fussy as a sleepy baby all the morning. I'll have a nap and wake up pleasant."

She closed her eyes and then opened them slowly for a last look at the sky and the encircling pines. "It's lucky I can always wake when I want to," she told herself with drowsy confidence. "I'll get up—at—two o'clock."

The last thing that made any impression on her before she went to sleep was a yellow butterfly, poised on one of the lower branches of the nearest tree, and when she woke and stared sleepily about her the gauzy insect was still there.

"I didn't suppose you'd stay fifteen minutes in one place," she said, lying still for a while because it seemed to her quite impossible to move. "Perhaps you've been having a nap, too." And then



## Stan

the butterfly fluttered strongly, and she saw that it was caught in a web, and sprang to release it.

"Ouch! That was a hard bed," she murmured, feeling unaccountably stiff. The butterfly sailed away, and Jane picked up blanket and pillow and started toward the house.

"Here's hoping Carol wasn't gazing out of the window when I walked in with these things," she thought as she put them back on the couch, and then, at the sound of some one on the stairs, she turned to see her mother, looking delightfully cool in a lavender gown.

"Why, Jane," mother said in surprise, "Carol was in my room a little while ago and said they'd decided that you and Rob had stolen a march on them and gone to Silver House. She and the other girls hurried off to find you."

"I wonder what made her say that. I thought we weren't going to do anything for at least an hour." Jane, obviously puzzled, looked at her mother, and then turned to the tall clock in the corner.

"Glory! It's four o'clock! I've slept for two hours and a quarter, and it didn't seem two minutes. Have the boys gone fishing? Why didn't somebody call me? I think it was mean to go off and leave me."

"The boys went long ago. They said walking



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wasn't violent exercise, so I didn't protest. And I think the girls were afraid of waking Aunt Caroline if they made strenuous efforts to find you. They had all been asleep, and they were sure you scorned naps, and that you had stolen away to get even with them for wasting their time."

Jane laughed. "Did I ever get left? I haven't the faintest idea where Rob is. Probably sleeping peacefully somewhere, for he was up before I was. Well, anyway, I feel like a perfect lady now, and I'll go up and change my dress, and walk over to Silver House, if you don't mind."

Half an hour later Jane stepped out on the piazza and closed the screen door softly. There was a hush about the house which made her feel that everything must be done quietly.

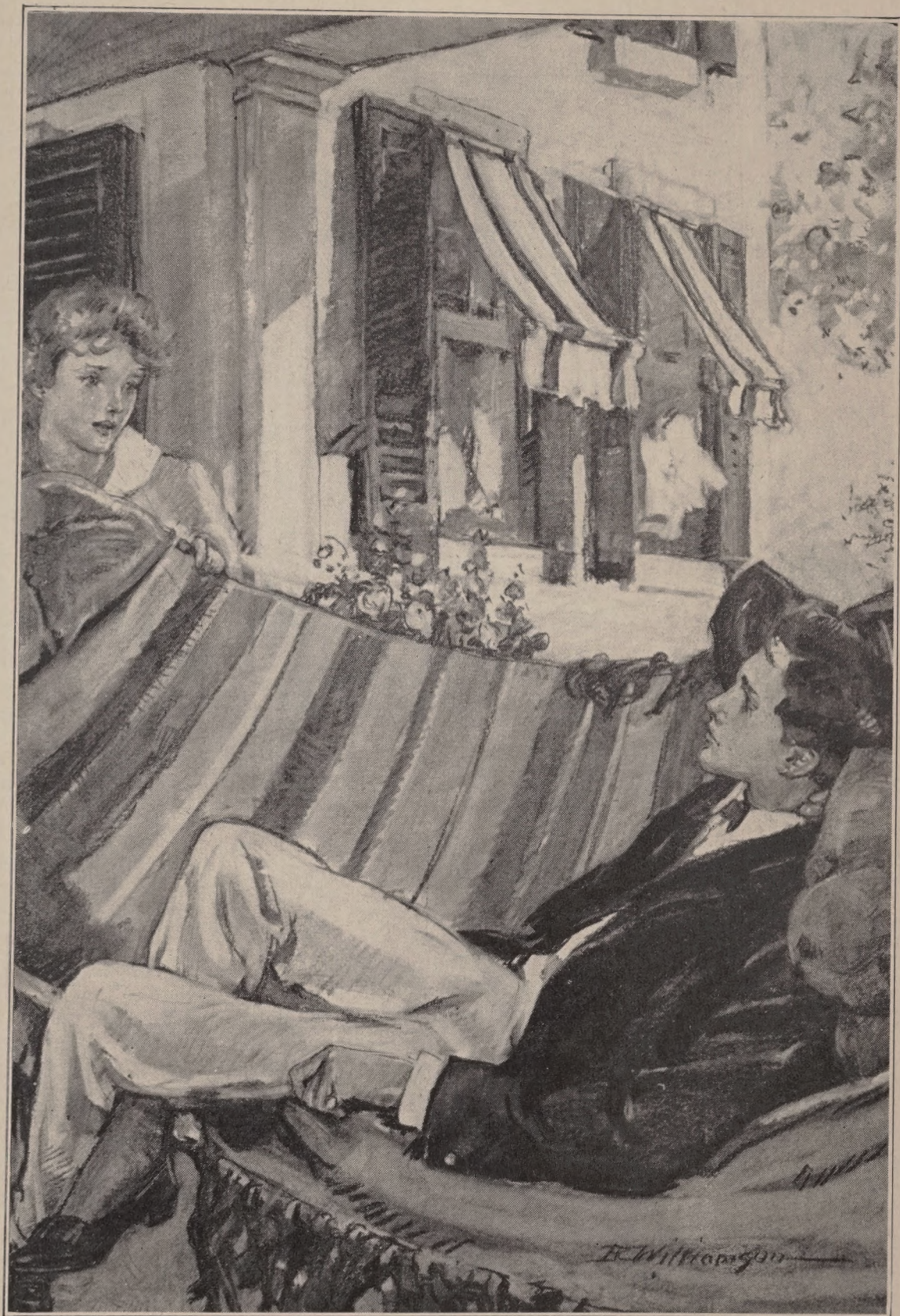
"Pretty Cora," she said, half under her breath, going up to the parrot's cage with only the friendliest feeling in her heart for its brilliant occupant.

"Get out," answered that feathered individual morosely, turning her back on Jane with insulting promptness.

"You're an impolite bird, and I don't like you." Jane turned her back in retaliation, and tiptoed toward the steps, noticing as she did so that the hammock at the other end of the piazza was swaying as though some one were in it.

"I bet that's Rob just waking up," she said to





“YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SOMEONE ELSE”







## Stan

herself, and without stopping to think, crept softly along until, with a little laugh of triumph, she looked straight into the face of the boy in the hammock.

The effect wasn't all she had anticipated, for there was no answering laugh, and the eyes looking into hers didn't brighten. On the contrary their expression was one of distinct annoyance.

"Oh, hello, I thought it was Rob," she said, trying to speak as if she were not at all disappointed.

"I knew you thought it was some one else." Stanley's manner was coolly indifferent.

"I—I—well, somehow I don't seem to be very popular on this piazza. I guess I'd better run along." The color flew into Jane's cheeks, and she retreated a few steps, wishing that he would say something more, and then she could say something pleasant, and then—oh, dear—she hated fusses, anyway, and this time she was so conscious that it was her own fault.

"Hurry up," screamed the parrot irritably. "Get out! Hurry!"

Jane laughed, and looked at Stanley for sympathy, but his expression hadn't changed. He didn't even think it was funny to be ordered off the piazza by a parrot, she told herself incredulously. She started toward the front steps, but reaching



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

them, halted irresolutely. - If she lost this chance she might not have another so good all summer. And yet there was always the possibility that he had not heard what she said, and that she might make matters worse by trying to explain.

Suddenly she turned and walked back to the hammock. "Say, Stan, I wish you'd walk over to Silver House with me, will you, please? I hate going alone."

"I suppose I can. I don't particularly care about going." In spite of his disagreeable manner, Stanley got slowly out of the hammock and walked along by Jane's side.

"I didn't dream of finding any one," said Jane. "I supposed you had gone with the boys."

"I said I wasn't going," answered Stanley, and relapsed into discouraging silence.

Jane stole a glance at him, and felt a sudden conviction that there was something deeper than mere sulkiness in his expression. He looked hurt, and uncomfortable, and generally out of tune.

"I remember now you did say so," she said at last. And then, "Are you grouchy with the whole world or just with me, Stan?"

The boy frowned. "You ought to know," he replied curtly.

All Jane's doubt as to whether he had heard her thoughtless remark vanished. "I do know



## Stan

what you mean, of course ; it would be silly and—and deceitful to pretend I don't. And I'm awfully sorry, Stan."

"Sorry you said it, or that I heard it?" asked Stanley with an irritating doubt in his voice.

"Both." Jane's meekness was touching. She felt that she was ready to humble herself to any extent to make things go pleasantly this summer.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter—now." There was a weary indifference in Stanley's manner which made Jane realize that she had no easy task before her. If he would only be cross and fight it out she could get on faster, she fancied.

"Yes, it does matter," she urged stoutly. "It was horrid of me to say that when I'd—well, when I'd teased you so hard ; oh, of course it would have been horrid anyway ; but, you see, if you hadn't heard you never would have known, and—oh, dear, I'm getting all mixed up."

Jane, all earnestness and contrition, looked at her gloomy companion with a frankly appealing smile which was quite lost upon him as he strode along with his head averted.

"You make it sound as if it were my fault that I heard," he said at last in an offended tone.

Wasn't that just like Stanley, Jane asked herself in a flash of acute exasperation. Of course she had not meant that.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Naturally you couldn't help hearing. I'm only trying to explain ——" and then she came to a sudden stop, because she could not tell just what she was trying to make clear.

"Oh, well, what difference does it make? You said it and I heard it, and you can't change that. I tried to get out of coming, but father made me. He was glad to get me off his mind, I guess." The last words were spoken under his breath, as if he were ashamed of himself for saying them.

Jane's mind worked in two or three different ways at once. She wanted to say something comforting, but didn't know how. "Now that you're here, and I'm apologizing as—as prettily as I can, why don't you try to have a good time?" she ventured at last with a little quaver in her voice.

"It sounds easy, doesn't it, but it isn't only you," he flung out after a moment. "Do you think I can't tell that they don't any of 'em care whether I go or stay? You wouldn't like it any better than I do."

"I should hate it," averred Jane solemnly. "I'd do a good deal to make people like me and keep them liking me."

"That's all very well for you. People like you just because you're you, and they can't help it."

Jane blinked over the surprise of this unconscious compliment but rushed on eagerly. "It



## Stan

isn't always such smooth sailing as you think. It's awfully easy for me to be selfish. And I say hateful things. I—I can prove it by you."

They were walking through a daisy-field now, and Stanley was absent-mindedly twitching off the heads of the flowers, and throwing them at an imaginary target. Suddenly he stood still and looked Jane squarely in the face.

"Hang it all, how's any one going to make people like him if he doesn't know why they don't?" he demanded irritably. His young eyes looked very miserable, and his forehead was drawn into a frown. "I—I couldn't talk so to any one else. You were a perfect trump last winter. And—and you know what a coward I am." He started along the path again, switching savagely at the unoffending daisies with a stick he had picked up. "I—I dream yet of seeing Molly go through the ice," he muttered with an uncontrollable shudder. "I can never move an inch, and there's no one to help."

"Stop thinking you're a coward," scolded Jane, as quick to sympathize as she had been to find fault. "If—if any man wanted to be president of the United States he'd never get there if he kept thinking about being a—a ragpicker." She paused for an instant to let that sink in, rather pleased, on the whole, with her impressive way of



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

putting it. And then, as she stole a quick glance at her companion, her voice softened. "Say, Stan," she said coaxingly, "you'll never get anywhere if you keep on worrying about that. I don't wonder you feel grouchy and critical. Any one ——"

"Grouchy and critical," repeated Stanley, looking rather dazed, and with the quick color rushing into his face. "So that's the matter with me."

They had gone more than half-way across the field by this time, and Jane could see a little way ahead the stone wall bordering the road which led to Silver House. Her time alone with Stanley would be short, and if she were ever going to say anything to clear the situation it must be now.

"Why, that's the way it seems to me," she faltered, realizing keenly that the task of being a reformer was a harder one than she had supposed. Some girls, she was sure, could have said a few wise, kind words, and Stanley would have been a changed boy for life.

"Oh, Stan, I don't know enough to tell you, and I'm only making things worse," she cried, feeling suddenly very humble. "I make so many mistakes myself. Only mother says not to stop to worry about those, but to keep on working for—for the best thing you can think of." Jane's cheeks were burning hotly, and her eyes were



## Stan

fixed on the ground with a troubled gaze. It was hard enough to talk to one's own mother about inmost feelings, but this was infinitely worse. "Mother's always telling me I think too much about myself, and perhaps, if you belonged to her that's what she'd say to you," she ended with despairing honesty, not daring to look at Stanley.

To her consternation, he started to run so swiftly that it left her gasping. In a flash she had time to wonder whether he was trying to escape her frankness; then her gaze steadied itself, and she realized that something was happening on the road they were approaching. On the stone wall Martin Joy was jumping up and down in obvious terror, while just beyond him an automobile skidded and plunged, and ran into a tree with a terrifying crash.

Jane saw two men shoot out of the machine, and for an instant she faced the old temptation to flee from trouble. Then she started in pursuit of Stanley, running almost as fleetly.



## CHAPTER VI

### A MIDNIGHT JOKE

By the time Jane reached the scene of the accident Martin Joy had scrambled down from the stone wall and was across the road, trying in his most beseeching manner to persuade the man who had fallen there to open his eyes and say where he was hurt. Not far away the other, who looked hardly more than a boy, was sitting up, aided by Stanley's arm, and staring about in a dazed way.

Almost at once he began talking in a high-pitched, excited voice. "You needn't think 'twas 'cuz I didn't know how to run the darned thing, but suthin' give way an' I couldn't stop her." He was on his feet now, and staggering a little as he went across the road. In spite of his coat of tan, he was pale, and he shook from head to foot at sight of the young man lying there so pitifully still.

"D'yu s'pose he's d-dead?" he stammered with lips that could hardly form the words. "D-dad said I'd end up by k-killin' some un."

"He's breathing," said Stanley, who was down



## A Midnight Joke

on his knees beside the unconscious man. "For goodness' sake, brace up and don't look so white, Jane," he added almost crossly. "You've got to help out."

"Wh-what do you want me to do?" faltered Jane, trying to control her chattering teeth.

"Why, run to the house, of course, and get help."

The sharpness of Stanley's tone helped to bring back her self-control, and Jane started off swiftly, carrying with her as she ran a vision of the still, white face with its closed eyes and frame of red-brown hair. Some one was running behind her, and just before she reached the house she heard Martin say breathlessly that he was going to find the boys.

"There ain't a soul here but me," said Susan Trot, who had hurried to meet her, and had taken in at once the appeal for help. For an instant she stood with lips pressed tightly together and eyes fixed on Jane's face. "Why don't we take that canvas hammock?" she questioned with sudden inspiration. "Mebbe you and I and Stanley could carry him in that."

Jane never could tell just what happened after that. She knew she did what she was told by Miss Trot and Stanley, and she tried not to look at the pallid face, not to hear the faint moans which



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

came from the white lips. Through it all she was conscious of the keen desire to get away from the sight of suffering, and she fought the feeling and hated herself for it. After what seemed to her a long time, when they had almost reached the house with their burden, Mr. Prescott and Don appeared from somewhere, and took her place and Susan's.

She would have liked then to sit down and put her head back, but Miss Trot's insistent voice, saying something about getting a bed ready, spurred her to renewed effort, and she hurried up-stairs in Susan's wake, and again did what she was told.

"All the rest of you get out of the room and leave him to me and Mr. Prescott," commanded Miss Trot when the limp figure, still without a sign of consciousness, had been placed on the bed. "Miss Jane, you ought to go and lie down," she added in a whisper. "You're white as a sheet."

"I don't need to lie down," protested Jane, but she was glad, nevertheless, to get into the steamer-chair on the piazza, and feel the air on her face. Don patted her shoulder when he came out of the house a few minutes later, but Stanley went down the steps without a word, and, after a little, she could see him talking with the boy who had driven the automobile.



## A Midnight Joke

"It was lucky that Martin found us on the way home," said Don, coming up on the piazza again. "David took the shortest cut to Rivercroft to telephone for a doctor, and bring your mother over here. And there come the girls and Martin now."

"Jane Stuart, I fully meant to tell you that you weren't to have any more adventures unless I was around," began Carol, startled by Jane's paleness, and saying, as usual, the first thing that came into her head.

"Don't make Jane talk about it," advised Hilda Prescott, slipping off up-stairs to see what she could do.

"Then I'm going to interview that boy. I've got to have my curiosity satisfied in some way." Carol started toward the road, where Stanley was just beginning to investigate the condition of the damaged machine, while its owner stood by forlornly.

"Stan was perfectly fine, Molly," said Jane. "He thought of everything, and told us what to do. Oh, it just made my heart stand still to see those men shoot out of the machine." She ended with a little shiver, and closed her eyes, as if by so doing she could shut out the mental picture that haunted her.

"Let's not talk about it," said Molly, sitting down near the steamer-chair. "Sylvia, you re-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

mind me of the 'old woman who lived in a shoe.' ”

“ I like it,” said Sylvia happily. She was partially hidden by Peter, who was sitting on her lap, while Pansy and Martin were crowding as close to her as possible. “ Tell Jane how Carol fished, Molly.”

Ten minutes later, Carol, coming up the steps, caught the sound of her own name. “ Who's talking about me now ? ” she demanded. “ Can't I leave you for five minutes and feel that my character is safe ? ”

“ What did you find out, Carol ? ” Jane asked eagerly. A faint color had come back into her cheeks, and her eyes were frankly curious.

“ The story of his life, but absolutely nothing about the other one. That is, I know he arrived on the Boston train, and that he was trying to find Miss Prescott.”

“ Hilda ? ” repeated Jane incredulously. “ Is he a friend of hers ? Why, Mr. Prescott didn't know him.”

“ Neither did I,” averred Martin solemnly for the tenth time. “ He came over my hill in the auto, and I thought he was going to run into me, but he didn't.”

“ And doesn't that chauffeur know the man's name, or anything else about him ? ” persisted Jane.



## A Midnight Joke

"Not a thing. But it's a second-hand machine, and his grandfather gave him part of the money for it, and he earned the rest, and his father doesn't believe he can ever learn to run it, and now he'll be more set against it than ever, and it wasn't his fault, and—oh, dear ——" Carol stopped for want of breath. "Honestly, in all my life, I never heard any one except myself run on at such a rate."

"Well, I guess you'd be excited if you'd gone through what he has this afternoon," remonstrated Kenneth, who had followed Carol on to the piazza. "He's scared stiff because he's afraid the man is going to die, and he's sure every one will think it's his fault."

"Poor fellow." Molly got up and started toward the road where the youth stood, still watching Stanley. "I'm going down to—to say something pleasant to him."

"There comes Aunt Caroline's car," said Ken suddenly. "I can tell its voice before I see it."

"There are mother and Spinksy," cried Jane the next moment. "My, but your own family looks good to you when—when you've been through an experience."

Kenneth suddenly moved close to her, and rubbed his brown head against her fair one. "I'm



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

your own family, too, Janesy," he said so softly that no one else could hear.

"Of course you are," whispered Jane, quite touched. "And Judy's in the car, too. And I can see Aunt Caroline and Uncle Stephen and Rob."

Just behind the big touring-car a sturdy little machine chugged in a businesslike way up the hill and turned in toward the house, and out of it jumped a sturdy man, as businesslike as his own machine. No one could mistake his profession, and Frederick Prescott took him directly up-stairs to see his patient.

Aunt Caroline walked toward the group on the piazza, talking as she came, but Mrs. Stuart slipped quietly into the chair beside Jane.

"It certainly seems as though adventures cling to the Stuart family," Aunt Caroline said, hesitating between the choice of seats offered by the girls and boys. "They've scarcely been here a week, and now an—an afflicted stranger is fairly flung into their midst. Tell me right away what you have found out about him."

"Not very much," answered Hilda Prescott, who had come down-stairs when the doctor went up, and whose brown eyes were full of excited interest. "I never saw him before in my life, and I can't imagine why he was coming to see me, but



## A Midnight Joke

the boy who drove the machine persists in saying that he was."

"I'm going to talk to him," said Aunt Caroline. "He's probably just pretending that he doesn't know, and there may be some mystery about it that we ought to find out. It's dangerous to take a strange person into your house."

"I'm glad the Stuart family doesn't feel that way." Donald, who was sitting on the edge of the piazza, tipped his head back to look at his grandmother. "If they had you might never have known your grandson, little Grandy."

"Oh, my dear, don't say that." Aunt Caroline's face and voice softened, and she pulled her boy's head back against her knee. "And, of course, no one can do any harm while he's unconscious. Anyway I'm going to talk to that boy. I'm often successful in getting information out of people when no one else can."

"I'll go with you," volunteered Uncle Stephen and Donald in the same breath.

"Very well ; come along. You see I'm obliged to have a body-guard," she explained, turning to the others with a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. "They've had experience with me, and they're both so afraid I shall hurt that boy's feelings."

Uncle Stephen chuckled. "She's on to us, Don," he said with an unexpected slanginess that



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

delighted Kenneth. "Come on, my dear. Perhaps you can make some arrangement to help that young fellow get his automobile home."

"Which means that uncle will think up some good way," said David, as his relatives left the piazza. "Hello, there's some one coming down-stairs." He turned to look into the front hall, and opened the screen door for Susan Trot, who came out with her eyes looking very big and bright, and a vivid color in her cheeks.

"Oh, if you please, Mrs. Stuart, would you mind coming up-stairs? The doctor would like to talk with you."

"How is my man?" inquired Martin Joy anxiously. "Is he asleep all the time?"

"Well, he ain't—I mean he hasn't waked up yet, but the doctor thinks he's going to come out all right. I must hurry back. He may need me," and Susan beamed upon them all as though the present crisis were a joy to her soul, however much she might feel its seriousness.

Fifteen minutes later Mrs. Stuart came out on the piazza again. "He's a pretty sick man, I'm afraid," she said at once in answer to the questioning looks directed at her. "But the doctor seems to understand the case. It's very curious——"

"What's very curious?" interrupted Aunt Caroline, at that moment coming up the steps. "Do



## A Midnight Joke

tell us right away if there's any clue to this mystery about his wanting to see Hilda."

"The plot thickens," Mrs. Stuart answered with a little smile. "Mr. Prescott has just discovered in the young man's pocket a paper which has written on it your name, Aunt Caroline, and Hilda's."

"And not mine?" moaned Carol, putting her head on Pansy's shoulder, and pretending to weep.

"My dear, the man's an agent," affirmed Aunt Caroline, turning to her husband. "They have all sorts of clever ways of getting in with people, and you know how they get hold of names."

"Decidedly enterprising agent to risk concussion of the brain in order to work on our sympathies," Uncle Stephen objected mildly. "I doubt if that's the solution."

"Mark my words, he's going around the country with something to sell," insisted Aunt Caroline firmly. "There are probably samples in his suitcase."

"Not a thing that the ordinary traveler might not have," answered Mrs. Stuart. "The suit-case is marked 'A. W.'"

"That might stand for 'American Watches,'" murmured her aunt obstinately.

Mrs. Stuart laughed, and shook her head. "I'm afraid we shall have to wait until he gets well



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

enough to tell us what his errand is. It's really dreadful that we can't let his family know anything about him."

"Do you b'lieve he has a fambly?" Martin crept close, and curled his fingers into Mrs. Stuart's hand. "I thought"—he was speaking so softly now that Mrs. Stuart bent her head to listen—"I—I planned that if he didn't have any relations I'd 'dopt him."

"Ho, Martin, everybody has relations," said Judy, whose sharp ear had caught the half-whispered confidence, "and you couldn't adopt any one. You're too little."

"Oh, Judy," groaned Jane. "Martin, you can adopt me if you want to."

But the boy's cheeks flushed, and he shook his head. "I've got to find somebody 'thout any relations," he said wistfully.

"Shan't I do?" queried Sylvia, pulling him down beside her again as Mrs. Stuart went upstairs.

"But—but you've got a guardian."

"So have you. Mrs. Bolton's your guardian. And I have a perfectly lovely picture postal for you to send her. Won't that be fine?" And Martin, quite forgetting for the moment his lack of family, smiled happily, and cuddled against Sylvia's encircling arm.



## A Midnight Joke

"Mother says please don't wait any longer for her, Aunt Caroline, because she thinks she'd better stay over here to-night," announced David, coming out on the piazza a few minutes later.

"You're sure I can't do anything to help?" asked Aunt Caroline, getting up from her chair with an obvious air of relief and starting toward her waiting car. "Well, then, I think we'd better go, because we're only in the way."

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Eliot, I believe I'll stay for a while, too," proposed Molly. "I can help Hilda about getting supper and putting the children to bed, and Stan says he'll come for me later."

Jane stopped for a moment beside the damaged automobile, on which Stanley, much soiled as to his hands and face, was still working. "Do you think you can make her go, Stan?" she inquired.

"Yes, at the end of a rope with a good machine to pull it." Stanley looked up with a besmirched, but cheerful, grin, and then, as if the sight of her suggested something not so pleasant, the smile faded.

Jane walked on. Stanley, when he was left to manage things, or when he could tinker a machine, was quite a different boy, she was thinking. "I suppose we can't shoot a man out of an automobile every day just for his benefit, though," she said to herself pensively.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Very nice of that boy, I'm sure, to be willing to come over here in the dark after his sister," remarked Aunt Caroline in a low tone to Carol, who happened to be walking beside her. "He's a handsome fellow, isn't he, and I must say it's a very good trait to be so obliging. I suppose I might send the auto after her," she ended thoughtfully.

"Please don't. It'll do Stan good to put himself out for Molly," said Carol impulsively. Then, warned by the surprise in Mrs. Eliot's face, she added, "He is a nice-looking boy, and Molly is perfectly devoted to him."

Every one missed Hilda and Molly and Mr. Prescott when they sat out-of-doors that evening, and sang all the songs they knew to the strumming of Donald's guitar.

"Doesn't it sound thin without Mr. Prescott's voice to hold us up?" lamented Jane. "And we certainly need another soprano. You're a little shirk, Sylvia. You never help us a bit."

"I can't sing," Sylvia answered in such a queer voice that Jane turned to her in amazement. The porch-light fell full on her friend's face, and Jane was quick enough to see that her expression held both sorrow and longing. Then Sylvia smiled at something Rob was saying, the moment passed, and Jane could only wonder.



## A Midnight Joke

Judy stole around to her sister between songs. "Say, Jane, you'll have to sleep in the room with me to-night, because mother isn't here," she said with some anxiety in her voice. She yawned as she finished speaking, and drooped against the back of her sister's chair.

"Oh, all right. You go up when you're sleepy, and I'll come later. I promise."

Judy hung against Jane's chair while another song floated out into the moonlight. She never could understand how these older girls and boys could have such a good time just talking and singing. Secretly she considered a great deal they said very foolish.

"Jane," she whispered insistently when the song had ended, and every one began talking at once, it seemed to her. "Jane, I'm awfully tired, and Aunt Caroline thinks I ought to go to bed now, and that room—that room seems terribly big and far away. I—I haven't got used to it yet, Janey, and mother's been here every night."

Jane shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, Judy, you're such a big girl now," she coaxed. "You know you go to bed alone when you're at home. And I hate to go off in the midst of the fun. Look here, I'll give you a choice out of four of my belongings to-morrow, if you'll run along now—or else sit down again and wait a little longer."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"What belongings are they?" queried Judy with the languid manner her sister dreaded.

"Oh, I don't know now, but something nice—that you'll like."

There was a pause during which Jane waited with some hope. Then—"I can't think of anything of yours I want," Judy said slowly. "And I can't sit up any longer, because Aunt Caroline said I must go, and—and—oh, Jane, I'm ashamed to tell her I'm afraid."

"I should think you would be," Jane answered crossly, getting up from her chair as she spoke. "Good-night, everybody. Judy wants to go to bed, and she—I—I guess I'll go up with her. See you in the morning, girls. No, I shan't come down again. It'll be too late," and, in the midst of a chorus of protesting remarks, a stony-faced Jane stalked off up-stairs with Judy meekly following.

Jane sat by the window and looked out into the darkness while Judy's preparations for bed were made in offended silence. She tried to see the garden with its flowers and the little splashing fountain, but the moonlight had not quite reached this side of the house. Once in a while she could catch the sound of talking, or a few notes of a song.

"I suppose you don't mind being left alone while I go into my room and get my things for the night," Jane said icily when the prolonged



## A Midnight Joke

silence had got on her nerves. Judy only shook her head without a word.

After her sister had got into bed, Jane still sat by the window. It wasn't really late, she was thinking, and if Judy would only go to sleep, she could slip down-stairs again. Every one would be glad she had changed her mind.

A rustling sound came from the bed and then a little sigh. Jane felt a pang of conscience which she promptly stifled. It was hard to understand why she should be made a martyr just because Judy was such a baby. Presently she put her head against the back of the tall rocking-chair and closed her eyes.

Somewhat later she was sure that Ken had turned the glare of his electric torch directly in her face, and she wriggled her head, and at last pulled open dazzled eyes to find herself just in the line of the moonlight, which was making a broad path from window to bed.

"Mercy! I must have been asleep for seven nights," she said to herself, getting up out of the chair, and feeling as if her feet did not belong to her. "Ouch! I've got a crick in my neck! I believe the crick in my temper's gone, though. I wonder if a moonlight bath is good for that sort of thing."

She tiptoed over to the bed where Judy, fast



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

asleep, looked unnaturally pale in the stream of light, except for certain little dark streaks on her face.

“Poor kiddie! She didn’t wash her hands clean, and then she cried,” Jane thought remorsefully. “And she didn’t sniff once so that I could hear. I’m a beast to be so mean to her.”

She softly pulled the shade to shield Judy’s eyes, and concluded to undress without making any light. There was no sound in the house, and she wondered what time it was. “It must be the middle of the night,” she decided, and at the thought lost all trace of drowsiness. It had always been one of her cherished ideas to be awake in the middle of the night, and see how things looked out-of-doors.

“If there’s a light in the hall, and the stairs don’t creak too much, I’m going down,” she determined, and without giving herself time to think, she went into the hall. Down below she could see a guiding glimmer, and the stairs received her light tread without complaint. To her surprise, the doors at both ends of the hall stood open, and this gave her a feeling of confidence in the night and the neighborhood. It was so strange a thing for her to be slipping out-of-doors at this time that she half wondered if it might all be part of a dream.



## A Midnight Joke

Out in the garden, the moon and the soft breeze made weird, fantastic tree-shadows, and Jane's heart beat a little faster as she walked. A lovely fragrance rose all about her, white flowers, touched by the moonlight, shone like silver, and the singing splash of the fountain came to her ear again. It was all so beautiful that a queer little feeling of sadness enfolded her, though she could not in the least understand why.

Suddenly a lithe, shadowy form crept from under a bush near by and rubbed against her, and she cried out softly, but in the next instant knew it for the black cat, which, like the parrot, went with the house.

"So, Mr. Othello, that's where you sleep, is it?" she queried, stooping to pat him. "Well, just to-night I shouldn't mind crawling under a bush myself. Isn't it glorious in this garden?"

The dusky Othello trilled a crooning reply; then followed silently as she walked back to the house.

"Good-night," she said under her breath as they reached the steps, and she put down her hand to touch the sleek head which rose to meet the caress. "Go back to your bed now, and I'll go to mine. This is my last adventure for the day, and I'm glad you've been in it."

She could see the shadowy figure still waiting when she closed the screen door. Then she tip-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

toed across the long hall almost to the front door, which like the other stood open to the breeze. She meant to take one look in that direction before going up-stairs, but a sudden sound made her pause, and shrink, panic-stricken, into a corner. Some one was coming quietly up the front steps, and Jane was too frightened to move or cry out.

Right away, to her intense relief, Molly spoke. "Let's sit here on the piazza for a moment, Stan," she said softly. "It was awfully good of you to come over for me, and wait so long."

"That's all right. It didn't seem long."

Silence followed while Jane longed to get away and did not dare to stir; and wondered why Molly was so late in coming home, and how Stanley could possibly be so agreeable about it. If they would only begin to talk again, she would slip up-stairs, she told herself.

Suddenly, with apparently nothing to suggest it, and as though the question had been long repressed, Stanley said gruffly, "Say, Molly, do you think I'm grouchy and critical?"

Jane smothered a gasp of surprise, and fled noiselessly up the stairs. Just as she reached the top, she heard the door at the back of the hall close, and she looked down to see Uncle Stephen going toward the front door. At almost the same moment the clock struck eleven.



## A Midnight Joke

"Mercy me! To be fooled twice in one day about the time is almost too much," she was thinking, as she closed the door of her mother's room with extreme care. "Wasn't I the proud young thing to fancy I'd been perambulating in the garden—alone—in the middle of the night? You're a deceiving thing, you nice old moon, but I love you just the same."

Jane's preparations for bed were rapid, and at the very end she bent over Judy and dropped a light kiss on her cheek. To her surprise, her sister's eyes opened, and a slender arm went around her neck.

"I'm sorry I was such a baby, Janesy. I'm not going to be again."

"Oh, Judy, I was a crosspatch. I'm sorry, too." And then Judy turned over with a satisfied sigh and went straight off to sleep again.

Not being in the least sleepy after she got into bed, Jane tried to think drowsy thoughts. Suddenly the memory of the question she had overheard came to her. "Poor old Stan sounded so uncomfortable," she meditated. And then with quick scorn, "I'm a fine one to criticize other people for being grouchy. Perhaps what I said is working, though; the way mother's speeches do in me. Something like putting in a yeast-cake when you're making bread."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

For some time she lay very still, but all at once she giggled softly, and turned her face into the pillow to stifle the sound. "I believe I shan't tell my middle of the night joke," she said to herself, "and I know Othello won't. But just suppose it had been the parrot."



## CHAPTER VII

### “THE GRIT BUTTON”

FOR the next three days the young people expected hourly that the mystery of the stranger, suddenly flung into their midst, would be solved. Then they began to realize that it might take a long time for the poor head to right itself, and they stopped demanding half-hourly bulletins, and contented themselves with a report morning and night.

Mrs. Stuart stayed at Silver House, and she and Susan Trot helped the poor fellow fight his troubles. And sometimes it was only Hilda with her soft voice and soothing touch who could quiet him, or her brother's firm grasp and gentle strength.

The Rivercroft girls and boys formed themselves into a relief corps, and took turns spending the day at Silver House, and helping with the housework and the children. As Jane said, it wasn't romantic to wash the dishes and the children's faces, but of course it had to be done.

In the meantime Stanley was inwardly fighting his own battles, and outwardly, so far as the girls



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

and the other boys were concerned, appearing just as he had since reaching Rivercroft. He had quite decided that if Jane thought him grouchy and critical, and a blot on the summer, probably every one else did, and first, last and always it hurt. Nevertheless this particular crisis brought out a certain helpfulness in him as well as in the others, and Hilda and Susan Trot began to feel quite safe about the children when Stanley offered to take care of them.

A week after the accident happened, Jane came out on the piazza at Silver House with an expression of unquenchable satisfaction in her eyes.

"He's better," she announced triumphantly. "He opened his eyes and looked at Susan as if he really knew something, and then he went to sleep—real sleep, I mean."

"When was this?" asked David, who with Rob had just come over from Rivercroft.

"Oh, about an hour ago. And Miss Trot is so thrilled. She's been wanting to catch his first intelligent glance. I believe she feels now that she's a real nurse."

"He ought to be able pretty soon to tell who he is, oughtn't he?" asked Rob.

Jane put on an experienced air and pretended to look over imaginary spectacles. "Don't hurry him; don't hurry him," she said in a tone very



## “The Grit Button”

like that of the doctor. “We may yet have to have that specialist from the hotel the doctor is always talking about. But it really does seem as if he ought to get better right away.”

“I know what will happen to Aunt Caroline if he doesn’t,” David said solemnly. “Her imagination will give out. She’s had him an agent for every sort of thing I can think of. And she’s sure we’re all going to be taken in some way.”

“Carol’s counting on his being a duke or a prince,” said Jane, pretending not to hear the door open behind her. “She thinks he looks like all the members of the royal family she’s known.”

“Ha! You think that’s funny, don’t you?” queried Carol, herself, with proper scorn. “Well, I don’t care how much you make fun of me, I shall stick to it that he has a very fine face, and I’m crazy to know who he is.”

“Well, time will tell. Are you all ready to start for home, girls? Wait just a few minutes, though, till I see mother and Mr. Chope,” and David went softly into the house.

“Stanley and Mr. Chope have found a fishing-place they want us to try to-morrow morning before breakfast,” remarked Rob. “At least, Stan won’t say he wants us, but we hear so from Mr. Chope. We’re in wrong with that youth, because we went off to walk without him this afternoon.



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We planned it on the spur of the moment, though, and we couldn't find him."

"Did you try?" questioned Jane, with obvious meaning.

"Sure. We wanted him to go. But we couldn't spend all the afternoon hunting for him, could we? Anyway, it's up to us to get started early tomorrow, and soothe his injured feelings. I wish to goodness he didn't wear 'em on the outside all the time."

"So do I," sighed Jane, and then, David coming back, the four started across the fields in the late twilight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I guess there ain't no chance of their comin'," murmured Mr. Chope, turning after a prolonged survey of the landscape, and preparing to bait his hook again. "Why didn't you haul 'em out of bed, Stanley, 'stid of slidin' off all by your lonesome?"

The boy, sitting not far away on the bank of the little river, pulled his line out of the water with a quick jerk, and examined the empty hook disappointedly. "I bet that was a big fellow; I got a sight of him as he slipped off," he grumbled. Then, as Mr. Chope's keen old eyes were still fixed inquiringly on him, he added slowly, "They'd have come if they felt like it. They wouldn't any



## “The Grit Button”

of them thank me for trying to make 'em get up early.”

The old man stared thoughtfully at him for a moment as though he were trying to see through the outer envelope of the handsome, sulky-looking boy, and to decide what was wrong with the inner machinery. In the meantime Stanley baited his hook again and swung it into the water. Over their heads the early sunshine was piercing the network of branches, and from somewhere near, an invisible bird uttered now and again a clear note.

“They’re missin’ it,” remarked Mr. Chope, with a little sigh of contentment, “when they stick to their beds on a mornin’ such as this. There ain’t nothin’ jest like it. I s’pose you’d have thought you was awful slighted if they’d stole off without callin’ you.”

This ending was so unexpected that Stanley twitched his line unintentionally, thereby scaring an investigative fish.

“That’s different,” he answered irritably.

“What d’ ju mean by ‘different’?”

“Why—why, they like each other; it makes an awful difference whether one of them is left out. They don’t care for the things I plan. I might have guessed they wouldn’t take any particular pains to crawl out of bed this morning.”



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“Sort of a case where three ain’t a crowd, and one has to flock all alone, hey?”

Stanley nodded, his lips shut tight, and a frown wrinkling his forehead. He didn’t in the least want to talk about this, he was sure. And yet something about the place, the morning, the hint of understanding in the old man’s voice and eyes, made it easier for him to answer.

“I happen to know that David was ’fraid he shouldn’t wake up early this mornin’ on account of bein’ so dead sleepy after that tramp he and the other two boys took yesterday afternoon,” Mr. Chope said casually. “When he and Rob came over to our house to git Lady Jane and Miss Carol last evenin’, Davy said he didn’t care to ask that starched-up house-man of Mis’ Eliot’s to wake him, but he was goin’ to git you.”

“I was almost asleep when he came to bed and I didn’t answer,” confessed Stanley, without turning his face toward his companion. He scowled a little over the memory of the walk from which he had been left out.

“Of course he might naterally have expected that you would wake him,” Mr. Chope’s voice went on mildly, after a pause during which he had added another fish to those already caught, and rebaited his hook. “I s’pose you know all three of those fellers legged it ’round considerable—



## “The Grit Button”

lookin' for you before they started off,” he added suggestively. “That was one of the times you was off flockin' alone, I figger.”

“I didn't know they were going.”

“Neither did they till 'bout five minutes before. They tried to find you at Rivercroft, and then they come 'round by Silver House thinkin' you might be there.”

“I guess they didn't hurt themselves trying,” answered Stanley with a sarcastic curl of the lip. He pulled his line in as he spoke, and dropped his rod on the ground beside him. “I shan't catch anything in a hundred years,” he said irritably. “You've got enough for a mess, anyway. I'm going back.”

Mr. Chope hauled from his pocket the watch by which the world ran. “Hm; we'll have jest about time to git to Silver House for breakfast. You better stop there. They ain't expectin' a thunder-cloud at Rivercroft.”

Stanley sprang to his feet, eyes blazing. “Look here, I don't know what right you have to talk so to me. I didn't want to come here this summer, anyway. I guess you wouldn't like it any better than I do to be round where folks think you're grouchy and faultfinding, and just put up with you because they have to.”

Mr. Chope got up, too, and busied himself with



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fishing-tackle and fish, and didn't look at the boy who stood motionless, with hands tightly clenched.

"'Twelve—thirteen—fourteen," the old man counted slowly; "that ain't so bad. Do you know it allus seems like a kind of a game to me—livin' I mean," he went on unexpectedly, "and I bet it's up to you now to take the kind of a jump that'll git you out of the hole you've got stuck in."

"I'm not in any hole that I know of," muttered Stanley, after a silence during which he had made up his mind not to take any notice of what the old man had said, and then could not help it.

"That's jest it." Mr. Chope picked up his basket of fish and started toward home. "We don't any of us reelize we're in those holes till somebody comes along and kinder slaps us inter knowin' where we are. Of course it's like swallerin' medicine to be told of your faults, but that don't hurt in the end."

The boy walking gloomily behind the old man reflected with some heat that it seemed to be easy for people to give him medicine of that kind. Far easier than it was for him to take it, he decided, feeling injured and forlorn and very much at variance with the world at large.

"You know there ain't a person in this world from the Char of Rooshy to—to—well, there ain't no one that can take all the time without ever



## “The Grit Button”

givin'. Of course I don't mean actooal give and take, you understand." Mr. Chope shifted the basket of fish from one arm to another, and went on thoughtfully, "and there ain't any one either that can go 'round expectin' to git slighted, and to have things go against him without havin' those very things happen pretty frequent."

"Hold on. Let me carry that basket," said Stanley, trying to speak as though the subject of fish were uppermost in his mind.

"Thanks," responded Mr. Chope, giving up his burden without the slightest protest. "I sometimes think I am gittin' a little old to kerry things when you strong young fellers are 'round. Well, as I was sayin', in this game of livin' we've got to everlastin'ly hustle to make folks like us—not sit back an' expect them to go out of their way to do it."

"Some people are liked without doing anything at all," flashed Stanley, following out the old man's ideas quite against his will.

"That's so. There's some that can't seem to help it. But, for my part, I'm terribly taken with the ones that ain't that way, and that gits hard knocks, and wins out in the end through sheer grit."

There was silence for a few minutes as the two walked in single file through the dewy grass.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Then Mr. Chope said delicately, "If you'll excuse me for bein' so pussonal, it seems to me that last winter—after somethin' pretty scary happened—you made up your mind strong to have everythin' different. Then they all tried to help out, and when they naterally got tired showin' you quite so much attention, you thought you was slighted, and you very soon got a chip on your shoulder agin. P'raps I'm wrong, but that's the way I figger it out."

"I guess you've hit it," muttered the boy, feeling a little dazed at having the situation set forth so clearly. It was none of Mr. Chope's business anyway, he told himself angrily. He didn't want to talk about it, and yet here he was agreeing helplessly with everything the old man said.

"Then was jest the time you'd ought to have pressed the grit button." Mr. Chope spoke hurriedly, for they were in sight of the house now, and the children were beginning to run in their direction. "That's the secret of the game—grit, and forgittin' all about yourself, and ——" the old man stopped talking, and his face wrinkled into a beaming smile as Martin came racing along the path toward them.

"Oh, Stanley, my windmill goes this morning! It's all right since you fixed it." Martin dodged Mr. Chope's welcoming hand and threw himself



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on the boy following. Then came Pansy, clamoring to walk beside Stanley, also, and at the top of the slope, fat Peter, finger in mouth.

“Roll, Peter, you’ll get here sooner,” called Stanley. “Martin, I believe I can fix the wind-mill so it will turn your little engine. Pansy, if you don’t stop grabbing my hand, I shall have to carry this basket in my teeth.”

“Oh, do, do,” shrieked Pansy delightedly. “Like a great—big—dog, do you mean?”

Mr. Chope, turning to take the basket from Stanley, saw him all at once in a new light, and nodded his wise old head delightedly. A little while before he had been quite of the opinion that he was wasting words on a sullen, unresponsive boy. But now it was different. “I really hadn’t ever noticed before how he acts with those children,” he said to himself as he went toward the barn. “He’s been so quiet ’bout it that I don’t believe any one else has, either. Why, I’ll bet he can do anythin’ if he’ll only put in his best licks.” He twisted his neck for one more look at the tall boy, going into the house with Peter on his shoulder, and the other two as close to him as they could get.

Just as he was leaving Silver House after breakfast Stanley heard Mrs. Stuart calling him softly, and turned to find her coming out of the house



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

with a book and pillow. She put her finger on her lips and looked so full of mischief and mystery that the boy smiled involuntarily as he went back to meet her. He often wondered if all mothers were like this ; so bubbling over with fun and good comradeship, and yet so wise and kind.

"Sh ! Don't let me be discovered by any of the young Indians who infest these parts," she said in a half-whisper as they met. "Hilda and Miss Trot have sent me off to have a morning by myself, and I've just narrowly escaped meeting Grandfather Prescott, who wants to tell some one about the book he's reading." As she talked she was leading Stanley toward a grove of trees where concealment might be possible. "Do you suppose you could capture a hammock somewhere and put it up here for me, and—and keep it a dark secret ? "

"Sure. Watch me," answered Stanley, responding at once to the charm of Mrs. Stuart's manner.

"It's a conspiracy. We'll never tell any one." They had reached the shelter of the trees by this time, and Mrs. Stuart's soft laughter was almost as joyous as Jane's.

"Sit down here with your back against this tree. Let me fix the pillow. There, now I'll go and make a raid on a hammock. If you hear a wild war-whoop you'll know I'm discovered, but I'll give 'em the slip some way."



## “The Grit Button”

Mrs. Stuart listened, but there was no indication that the raider had come to grief, and presently he was back again with the hammock.

“I brought this too,” he said, producing a piece of pink mosquito netting. “I thought perhaps I could fix it so the flies won’t bother you.”

“That will be fine.” Mrs. Stuart was idly watching Stanley as he made the hammock ropes fast. “I’m so happy this morning because ‘Martin’s man’ is really so much better.”

“Has he said anything about who he is?”

“Not a thing. In fact, he’s spoken only a word or two. The doctor thinks it won’t be long now before he’ll be on his feet, but he says we must let him take his own time about talking, and not question him in any way. It’s too bad, because some one will probably be very anxious about him.” Mrs. Stuart ended with a sigh, and the happiness of her expression was a little dimmed.

“There, try this, please.” Stanley held the hammock open invitingly, and then placed the pillow under Mrs. Stuart’s head. “Now, I’ll see if I can drape this pink netting so that it won’t flop down on you.

“You’re thinking how you would feel if David had gone off somewhere, aren’t you?” he went on, suddenly going back to Mrs. Stuart’s last remark.

“Yes. Or Don, or you or Rob. Somehow I



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seem to have adopted you all. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind!" The word said so much that it seemed unnecessary to go on. Stanley was silent for a moment as he deftly finished the adjustment of the netting. "There, I bet there isn't a chance for any fly to get in there." He fussed around for a moment or two testing the hammock ropes again, twitching the netting into place, picking off a leaf which had fallen upon it, and all the time looking as though he wanted to say something, and couldn't quite make up his mind. Mrs. Stuart waited silently, with that smile which always drew him to her.

"Do you suppose," he said at last, flushing hotly, and bringing out the words with difficulty, "do you suppose I can ever forget about being a coward when—when Molly went into the water?"

"My dear boy, yes." Mrs. Stuart forgot that she was tired, and sat up with such sudden energy that the hammock rocked perilously; they both laughed, and the tension was broken.

"You must not worry any more about that. It's done with, and you only hamper yourself by thinking of it. I hoped you had put that out of your mind."

"I have tried, but it's always turning up," confessed the boy. "Let me fix the pillow so that



## “The Grit Button”

you can lie down. I ought not to be bothering you when you're tired. You see to-day some one tried to make me feel that it's—well, that it's up to me to make people love me or leave me,” he went on, making an effort to speak lightly. “But just when I begin to think I can, that other idea steps in and gives me an awful slump. Somehow you always seem to understand. It—it helps to tell you.”

“Stan, you're all wrong if you let what has gone by hinder you.” Mrs. Stuart's cheeks grew pink, and her eyes held a comprehending mother-look which made the boy's frown disappear. “Probably the next time your courage is tested you'll do the right thing. But not if you paralyze your will and your impulse by brooding over a past failure.”

“You make me feel like getting into the game,” mumbled the boy indistinctly. And then under cover of poking up the pillow, he somehow managed to give Mrs. Stuart's hand a squeeze which in itself seemed thanks and a promise.

“I'm going off and leave you to rest now,” he said decidedly. “Don't you need another cushion, or couldn't I swipe you something to eat or drink?”

“Not a swipe. You're a bad boy to try to teach me slang. If I'm not discovered I shall read a little and then take a nap. And, Stanley”—the



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gay voice softened, and her eyes held him—"don't forget that I'm in the mother-business, and I love to be told. We'll conspire again, we two, and not another soul shall know."



## CHAPTER VIII

### PLANNING A PARTY

ONE morning, a week later, Jane, who prided herself on getting up at least respectably early, woke to such darkness that she was sure daylight had not yet arrived. Some warning idea made her pull herself out of bed, however, and patter across the room to look at Carol's little traveling clock, which had the assurance to point to half-past seven.

"Mercy! I was planning to take a walk before breakfast," she murmured, and instinctively looked toward the windows, where the rain was running down the panes in little rivers. "We'll have to start a boat-line over to Silver House instead of walking, I guess."

When she came back from her bath and began to dress, she deliberately opened and shut a bureau drawer with some noise, and shoved a chair so that it hit the foot of the other bed, but there was no response from its occupant.

"Dear me, the cook and the others will be crosser than ever if we're all late to breakfast," she said to



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herself apprehensively. "Say, Carol, it isn't so early as it seems ; it's seven-thirty—past that—and the clock's racing like mad." She was pulling the bedclothes gently, and running a tickling finger around the oval of Carol's face.

"Don't!" grunted that young person sulkily, turning her face as far away as she could get it. "You go on. I don't want any breakfast." In another moment her regular breathing seemed to prove that she was lost to all sense of duty or friendship.

"That's what you say every time," coolly remarked Jane, getting dressed as fast as she could, and taking her chances on having her conversation heard. "And then you come down-stairs just before the rest of us finish, and things have to be made hot for you. Aunt Caroline says the servants make her feel already as if she were sitting on a volcano."

There was a smothered sound from the bed which might have been either mirth or wrath. Then Carol sat up with a bounce and began to look for her slippers.

"Jane Stuart, if I weren't one of the sweetest-tempered girls in the world you'd get your little head taken off," she said sleepily. "When I go down late don't I always beg them not to do anything for me?"



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Jane laughed. "Oh, Mrs. Eliot, I really don't mind cold toast," she mimicked effectively. "Isn't Milly an angel to cook that egg for me? No, Sophie, you must not take the coffee out to be heated. I ought not to make so much trouble."

"You really do make it sound like me, Lady Jane." Carol was sitting on the edge of the bed, regarding her friend with flattering attention. "I'm quite an artist at getting people to do things for me, don't you think? Really, I didn't know I was so—what was that word your Uncle Stephen called me the other day?—so ingratiating. Why, I'd even wait on myself to be spoken to thus sweetly."

"Carol, you certainly are the limit." Jane tried to frown on her, but giggled instead. "I never saw anything to equal the way you slide out of things. We all of us just dance around and wait on you, and think we're doing it because we want to."

"And don't you want to?" Carol inquired with apparent innocence. "I should think you'd just love it." She was putting on her shoes, and her head was bent, but Jane could see a little smile curving her lips, and she knew that, as usual, Carol was enjoying talking over her own shortcomings.

"Good-bye. I'm all dressed and I'm going down," Jane said with a sudden change of sub-



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ject. "I suppose we'll see you some time in the future."

She was almost out of the room before Carol spoke. Then she said with sudden energy, "Jane Stuart, I just know you're a descendant of one of those old reformers we've studied about. I believe you want to make a perfect lady of me, and I can't give up all my nice little faults just to suit you. If I didn't—really—love you to pieces I should think you were preachy."

"Horrors!" Jane came back into the room and regarded her friend with startled eyes. "You don't really think so, do you? Just nudge me, or cough, if you ever find me doing it again, will you? I should loathe being preachy."

Jane's anxiety was so genuine that Carol went off into a peal of laughter, and couldn't answer for some time.

"Darling, you just have symptoms of it, and I'm the only one who affects you that way. And if you want to reform me, I won't say a word against it, because you're such a dandy girl. And Jane, I'm going to be good now and hurry. I wouldn't for the world have a volcano erupt under nice little Mrs. Eliot."

Jane, going down-stairs, was in a mental maze. She wondered if Carol, underneath all her gay good-nature, really did think she was preachy.



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Perhaps Stan did, too. He would have some right to think so. At any rate he seemed to be on pretty good terms with her just now—and then she stopped thinking about her own affairs, for she had reached the hall, and just outside on the piazza there was a great stamping of feet and shaking of umbrellas.

“What’s the news from Silver House?” she demanded, flinging open the front door, to find Rob and David spreading their dripping umbrellas on the piazza.

“The best yet,” exulted her twin. “Martin’s man is going to be dressed and sit up for a while to-day.”

“Great! Has he—has he mentioned who he is?” This had been so frequent a question that they were beginning to feel shy about asking it.

“Not yet. And the doctor still says he mustn’t be questioned about it, and that it’ll all come out right in time. It seems pretty strange to me, though,” and David shook his head wisely.

“Did Sylvia go over with you? It’s her day.”

“Yes, she would go. And Don stayed over to help. He said it would take two like them to equal energetic persons like Jane and Molly.”

“Do you hear that, Mollyolly?” Jane flung back over her shoulder at Molly, who was descending



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the stairs with her arm around Mrs. Stuart. Behind them came Stanley, and Carol had just reached the top of the stairs.

"Faith, an' I do, an' I'm that proud of meself," answered Molly with a broad accent.

"Where do I come in?" inquired Carol in a small, meek voice. "If Sylvy's a half, I suppose I'm only a third or a fourth."

"Merely a sixteenth," David put in hastily, and fled down the hall with her in close pursuit.

Aunt Caroline was breakfasting in her room because she hated to get up on rainy mornings, and Uncle Stephen had gone fishing with Mr. Chope, so Mrs. Stuart and the young people had the dining-room to themselves.

"Listen, all of you," said Jane when breakfast was half over, "I have an idea."

"Out with it." "Take good care of it." "Treat it tenderly; you may never have another," came at the same instant from three of her companions.

"When you've quite finished trying to be funny I'll tell you what it is," Jane said with cold dignity, trying her best to look severe.

"Don't mind them, Jane. They haven't any ideas themselves. That's why they're so foolish," Stanley encouraged unexpectedly.

"Thanks. It's a comfort to have some one



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stand up for me," murmured Jane, assuming a martyr-like air. "I think I'll tell you, Stan, after breakfast, and we'll have it for a secret."

"Oh, go on, Jane, don't be silly. You know mother doesn't particularly like us to have secrets," admonished Judy, who had been waiting in expectant silence for her sister's idea. She never could understand why they should stop for so much foolish conversation when something was waiting to be told.

Jane laughed. "Judy, your eyes are as big as saucers. I'll tell them for your sake. You see, I think we ought to do something to celebrate because Martin's man is going to sit up to-day. Also it's rainy, and we can't stay out-of-doors all day the way we have so far."

"Both exceedingly worthy thoughts. What do you propose to do about it?" murmured Rob.

"Well, if Aunt Caroline is willing, and mother agrees—and Uncle Stephen doesn't make any objection"—Jane with one eye on Judy was pulling the words out slowly—"I think we might have some kind of a party this evening."

"Such as—what?" queried David, looking at his twin with approving eyes.

"Oh, I don't know exactly. We'll have to think it up. Perhaps each one of us can do some stunt and not tell what it's going to be."



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"I'm not that kind. I can't do stunts," remarked Stanley. "I'll be audience."

"Oh, if every one's going to begin by saying that." Jane's disappointment was obvious.

"I know something you can do, Stan. I'll tell you after breakfast," Molly put in hastily. "Why don't we invite the Tinkle Sisters for audience, Jane? They're still bored to tears by living in the country, even though they do know us."

"Good idea, Molly. David and I will be escort committee for them." Rob pushed back his chair as the others rose from the table. "Want me to go over to Silver House and tell the others, Lady Jane?"

"Oh, let me do that," begged Stanley, with surprising eagerness.

Jane, catching a sudden, meaning glance from mother, thought quickly.

"Yes, will you, Stan? And after you get back do you mind staying around where we can call on you? Rob, you may interview the Tinkles. But you must both wait until I ask Aunt Caroline."

"Please beg Tinkle Sisters to come; and aren't there some other neighbors we could ask?" said Carol when Jane had come down with the desired permission and the boys were leaving. "I've just thought of something we might have, but it will take almost all of us for performers, and there must be an audience."



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"We'll see what we can do," Rob called back. "Mr. Chope says there aren't any real, 'so to speak,' neighbors about here, but perhaps we can scare up some one."

"I believe they're going to do both errands together," said Jane, watching the boys as they splashed through the wet grass. Carol and Molly had gone back into the house, but mother was still on the piazza, gazing after the boys with an expression which David sometimes called her "shiningly-thoughtful look."

"What is it, mumsey? What makes you look so pleased?" Jane questioned curiously.

"I was just thinking—just thinking what good company Rob is for any one. He's so wholesome and cheerful and—well, altogether normal. You'll appreciate the value of that last word when you're older, Janey. I like Rob."

"So do I. But, mother, why shouldn't he be cheerful? Everybody likes him, and he has about everything he wants and he's going to college next year, and ——"

"Well," said Mrs. Stuart, and then again, "well ——" as if there were something she might say, but would not. "Anyway, we're happy to have him here with us this summer, aren't we, and glad he's having a good time. I'm especially pleased to see him go off with Stanley in that friendly way."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“Oh, mumsey, that’s why you’re so taken with Rob all of a sudden. You certainly are the most persevering person when you make up your mind to anything. Here’s hoping your faith may be rewarded, though I have my doubts.” Jane shook her head, and looked so solemnly wise that mother laughed and gave her a little shake.

“Honestly, mother, I try to keep up with Stan’s changes of heart, but it makes me dizzy,” Jane went on plaintively. “A week ago he was quietly slipping out of the way every time I came within speaking distance, and now he’s so sweet and agreeable I—I’m afraid something’s going to happen to him.”

“I rather think he’ll come through safely. And, Janey, I believe it’s going to clear before the day is over. The clouds are certainly growing thinner.”

After that an air of deep mystery pervaded the house, and reached even the kitchen, where a pleasanter atmosphere than usual prevailed. Carol took Aunt Caroline and Mrs. Stuart into her confidence at once, and so cajoled the former that she offered her entire wardrobe for inspection and loan.

Jane, who dashed between her own room and mother’s or Aunt Caroline’s about once in fifteen minutes, chuckled over her aunt’s rapt absorption in Carol’s plans.



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"Aunt Caroline is so interested I believe she'd do an act herself if she could," she confided to Rob and Stanley, who were just coming in the door as she ran down-stairs for something. "How about Tinkle Sisters, boys? And could you rake up any one else?"

"The Tinkles were delighted and so were we, eh, Stan? It was baking morning at their mansion," Rob added by way of explanation.

"Miss Lily is trying to work up again on all the things her mother taught her how to cook, and she wants us to come over and test them because Sister isn't real hearty," said Stanley.

"How you'll hate that. Well, are the Prescotts coming? And, once more, did you find any one else?"

"Curb your impatience, child, and give us time." Rob paused provokingly, and Jane held on to herself, and would not please him by teasing. "Yes, they'll come, and Ken, of course. Then Mr. Chope is going to ask a Mr. and Mrs. Batt. Mr. Batt brings vegetables to Silver House, and he's quite a character, I guess."

"Batt! What a name! I hope I shan't forget and call him Ball. How did Sylvia and Don like the idea?"

"Oh, of course they vowed they couldn't do anything entertaining, but Stan and I told 'em they'd have to think up something."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“ Well, they’ve both got to be in my performance, and we shall have to rehearse it this afternoon,” observed Carol, who, unperceived, had been looking down from the hall above. “ What time are they coming home? ”

“ About three o’clock, Sylvia thought. Now what do you want us to do, girls? I’m not much on general entertaining, but I can hammer and carry things.”

“ Isn’t that touchingly modest for the president of his class? ” Jane said. “ He sounds like a real little beast of burden.”

“ You’ve got to be chief hero in my part of it, and Jane says you’re to announce everything. So please be funny, Rob.” Carol smiled at him maliciously from the top of the stairs.

“ Jiminy ! You make me want to get after you when you talk like that. Just as if any one could be funny to order.” Rob shook his fist at the retreating Carol, whose mocking laugh floated back to them.

“ Don’t mind her,” counseled Jane. “ She’s a tease from Teasetown. Come into the living-room with me. I want to consult you and Stan. David’s gone over to Miss Tinkle’s to see if he can borrow some things Carol wants.”

From that time on there was much running up and down stairs, and moving of furniture ; frequent





“DON’T MIND HER”







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discussions, and the calling of Carol to decide disputed points. Whenever this last happened, Judy went around with a basket to collect scissors, thimble, thread, dress materials, which Carol scattered in her wake. Somebody was always being summoned to Mrs. Stuart's room to try on something, and in spite of the gloomy weather the house assumed an air of festivity, and little by little lost the atmosphere of spick and span-ness which had distinguished it.

All the morning the sun struggled to get through the clouds, but it was not until three o'clock that permanent sunshine and Sylvia arrived at almost the same moment. Don came, too, and slipped off up-stairs with a suit-case, calling for David, before any one could interview him.

"Why, Sylvy," said Carol, going with Jane out on the piazza to meet their friend, "you look perfectly radiant. Why—why, I never saw you look so happy."

"Rainy day. Poor Cora," interrupted the parrot, moodily preening her feathers.

"Mercy! You're way behind the times, Cora. The sun's out," expostulated Jane. "But you do look different, Sylvia. What's happened?"

"I guess you'd look happy if you'd found something you thought you'd lost forever," Sylvia said, walking into the house; and though they followed



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her, and used their most persuasive methods, no amount of teasing would induce her to say anything more on the subject.

Most of the rest of the afternoon was given to the rehearsal of Carol's part of the program, and again there was much running about to collect stage-properties which had been forgotten, or only just now suggested. It seemed to be a hilarious occasion for all the performers, and Uncle Stephen, sitting on the piazza, outside the windows of the living-room, smiled in sympathy as funny remarks and bursts of laughter floated out to him.

"We're getting old, Polly; do you realize it?" he said to the parrot, at that particular moment clinging upside down to her perch.

"Pretty Cora. Nice Cora," she remarked, instantly resuming a more dignified position, and cocking one eye at him.

"I beg your pardon, your name is Cora, isn't it? And, of course, we can be pretty and nice even if we are old," chuckled Uncle Stephen.

To which the parrot responded with a cackling laugh that brought Jane to the window.

"Hello, uncle. We didn't know any one was here. Do you think we're all crazy? Spinksy says that if no one else gets any fun out of it we shall."

"So shall I. Are your performers all letter-perfect?"



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"Some of them are not nice at all. Sylvia says she never took part in anything before, and knows she can't. She's that mild kind, you know, that you think you can persuade, and then you find she's as firm as a rock." Jane, leaning out of the window, with her face close to Uncle Stephen's chair, lowered her voice, and went on in a confidential tone: "Sylvy's got something on her mind this afternoon, but she won't tell us what it is. When she came from Silver House she looked like a perfect 'Merry Sunshine,' but now she's getting a little pale. Her eyes shine, though. What do you suppose it is?"

"I haven't an idea," Uncle Stephen answered with great honesty, and an hour later, being taken into their confidence by Don and David, he congratulated himself that Jane had spoken just when she did.

Half an hour before the performance was to begin Carol, rushing into Molly's room for something, stopped short at sight of Sylvia, prone on the bed with a handkerchief over her eyes.

"Goodness, gracious, you poor thing, you don't mean to say you've gone to bed with a headache? Shan't I call Mother Stuart?"

Sylvia muttered something unintelligible, and pressed the handkerchief more tightly over her eyes. "Don't call any one," she mumbled. "Please, please leave me alone a little while."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Carol bent over her with some anxiety and laid her hand on the slim hand holding her handkerchief. "Why, it isn't a bit hot," she said in a relieved tone. "Perhaps, after a little while, you'll be ——"

"Yes—yes, I shall," Sylvia interrupted impatiently. She turned her face into the pillow, and smothered something which might have been a little moan of pain. "Please go away," she said in a muffled voice. "And, if you care the least bit about me, don't let any one come. If I can only be left perfectly quiet for an hour ——"

"It will make you better, of course." Carol's voice held reassurance enough to cure a dozen headaches. "Perhaps you'll even be well enough to come down and take your part—it won't be till the very last thing. But don't you worry about that," she added hastily, moved by Sylvia's limp dejection. "I'll get Hilda to do it. And I solemnly promise not to let any one come near you. Don't you want me to wet that handkerchief for you?"

"Oh, no, no!" Sylvia clutched it tightly, and burrowed deep in the pillow. Carol, seeing nothing else to do, found what she had come up for, and tiptoed stealthily out of the room.

"I'll get Don to keep guard, and see that no one disturbs her," she decided as she ran down-stairs.



## Planning a Party

“Jane will get it out of me in a minute if I try to be in two or three places at once.” And then she almost screamed because some one, who looked like a stranger, but must have been one of the boys, of course, started to come out of Uncle Stephen’s den just as she was going along the hall. Before she could really see him he had disappeared and she found herself staring at the closed door!

“Now, what do you think of that?” she said softly, and then she heard Jane calling her, and she forgot everything else.



## CHAPTER IX

MRS. BATT

AFTER the manner of amateur performances this one was late in beginning, and the audience, which made up in enthusiasm for its lack of size, seemed to have an appetite heightened by the delay. Judy and Kenneth, who sat in the chairs nearest the screens which divided the long living-room, kept up an intermittent applause intended to encourage the performers to immediate action.

"I'm not going to wait another minute for David," Jane said impatiently to the little group assembled behind the scenes. "I can't see why Uncle Stephen needed to have him do something else just at this time. I wanted to have our act first so that I wouldn't have to stay around in costume."

"Want me to look him up?" Rob offered helpfully, but, before he could leave the room, there was a loud knocking on the front door, and then the sound of an unfamiliar voice.

"We reelly couldn't git here on time, 'cause we've had to foot it the last part of the way," a high-pitched voice said apologetically, and a mo-



## Mrs. Batt

ment later two persons were ushered by Uncle Stephen into the living-room.

Jane, peering through the hinged part of the screen, saw a man and a woman take their seats, and wondered who they were. The light in that part of the room was turned down, and she could not clearly see their faces.

"Why, that must be Mr. and Mrs. Batt," whispered Rob, who was looking over her shoulder. "He's the vegetable man I told you about this morning. Don't you remember I said Mr. Chope was going to invite them?"

Mr. Batt's cheerful voice reached them at this moment. "Wal, naow, it shore is kind fer you to invite us here to-night. Mis' Batt and me, we're awful fond of young folks and their doin's. I persume we've kept the show waitin', but you can't begin too quick to suit us, kin they, Mis' Batt?"

His wife shook her head and murmured something which Jane could not hear. Then she coughed faintly and buried her face in her handkerchief.

"You'll have to go first, Molly," said Jane, still irritated over David's delay. "Do you mind?"

"No-o. I should be just as scared later as I am now. Fire away."

"Are you ready with the screens, Stan and



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Don?" whispered Jane. "All right, Rob, announce her."

It was always Rob who had to do this, and he was ready with a neat little speech setting forth the transcendent accomplishments of Mademoiselle Molly Oliver, favorite story-teller in all the courts of Europe, who would now tell them the thrilling tale of "The Obstinate Pancake and the Seven Hungry Children."

Molly had to stand there for an instant, smiling at her audience, until Mr. Batt's resounding applause could be stilled by his wife. Then she began with, "Once upon a time there was a poor woman who had seven hungry children." Jane, peering out from behind the screen again, could see that Mr. Batt was listening with his mouth open, and his whole attitude one of closest attention.

Molly's simple, intimate way of telling the story made the seven hungry children, waiting for their mother to finish cooking the pancake, seem very real and very hungry. So much so that when the disobliging cake jumped from the pan, and rolled out of the door, and along the road, with the seven children, and the mother, and the lame father on crutches in close pursuit, Mr. Batt uttered an apparently unconscious, "Sho, ain't that too bad?" which made Ken giggle.



## Mrs. Batt

And when the bold pancake was met by the man, the hen, the cock and the duck, and said "Good-morning" each time in its light-hearted way, and then rolled and rolled and rolled before either one of them could get so much as a nibble, Mr. Batt chuckled audibly, and held his hands ready to applaud as soon as there should be a chance.

He looked a little doubtful, however, when the pancake met a pig, and went along with its new acquaintance until they came to a river, and was there invited to sit on the pig's nose and be carried across. Knowing the habits of pigs, perhaps he felt sure that that was the end of the disobliging pancake. At any rate, when the pig, by way of Molly, gave a snort, and threw up his head, and every one knew that the hapless pancake had been swallowed, Mr. Batt clapped his hands, and laughed until his wife had to slap him on the back.

"Good story, Molly," said Uncle Stephen, as Molly came back to make another bow. "I'm going to have you tell it all over to me to-morrow."

"Wal, now, sir, I should like to come over and hear it, I reelly should." Mr. Batt stood up despite the efforts of his wife to pull him into his chair again, and directed a beaming smile toward Uncle Stephen. Miss Lily Tinkle, much enter-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

tained by Mr. Batt's remarks, giggled uncontrollably, and was reproved by her sister.

"I understand," continued Mr. Batt, clearing his throat, "that this is a party where most every one is expected to git right up and do suthin' to—to kinder liven up the others, and I jest want to say that I'm awful sorry I ain't got no talents in that line. But my wife"—he paused impressively, and then went on in a confidential tone—"my wife can sing songs to beat the band. I told her she'd got to do it, that is if you wanted her to, and I thought p'raps you wouldn't mind listenin' to her now, 'cause she's gittin' awful scared."

Mr. Batt dropped back into his seat with the air of one who has conferred an unexpected pleasure on his friends, but his wife kept her head down.

There was an embarrassing silence, and then Uncle Stephen got up and started toward the hall. "It would give us great pleasure, I'm sure, to hear Mrs. Batt sing," he said in his kindest manner. "I'll go and consult the managers."

"You might tell 'em," Mr. Batt called after him, "you might tell 'em that if anybuddy could strike a few chords on the banjo or the guitar, jest so's to give her voice a little support, she'd like it."

"Here's the man for that," responded Uncle Stephen, passing Don, who was standing in the



## Mrs. Batt

doorway, and giving him a little push into the room.

Jane, who had heard all this from behind the screens, met her uncle in the hall with consternation in her face. "Do you suppose we can stand it, Uncle Stephen?" she whispered anxiously. "It would be awful if any one should laugh and hurt her feelings. I don't mind having something else on the program, for Spinksy hasn't got back yet, and I can't do my part without him."

"Hasn't he really? It was thoughtless of me to send him on an errand just at the last minute. Well, Janey, I think every one will try to be polite to the poor little woman. You can see that—that Mr. Batt probably misunderstood. And we shouldn't want to make them feel uncomfortable, you know." Uncle Stephen took off his glasses and wiped them with great care, and Jane fancied that he was amused over Mr. Batt, and was trying to conceal it.

"Oh, of course not. She isn't an old lady, is she, Uncle Stephen? I can't see her very well from here with the lights turned down."

"No, not old. Her hair is white, but her face looks rather young. I'll go back now and arrange it, as I see you're in costume and can't appear."

Jane and Carol retired to the little room back of the living-room, and after a brief delay Mrs.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Batt was conducted into the hall, where she had a brief conference with Donald, and then into the region behind the screens. Mr. Batt, standing in the doorway that led into the hall, asked in his genial way if the lights near where his wife would stand might be lowered, as her eyes were weak. That being done he beamed upon the company with an air of honest pride.

Jane, peeping from the little room, could not have told just what she was expecting from the shy-looking figure that stepped from behind the screens, but she certainly was not prepared for the fresh, lovely voice which, after the first anxious moment, steadied itself bravely. The song was about a rose, and the singer's voice was as sweet as the flower of which she sang.

"My goodness! What a voice to be buried here in the country!" whispered Carol excitedly as the first verse ended.

"Sh!" warned Jane, fearing to lose a note.

At the end of the song, Mrs. Batt bowed in an embarrassed fashion, and took a step or two backward as though wanting to get out of sight as quickly as possible. Unconsciously, however, she had moved to one side during her song, and in stepping back she knocked her head sharply against the screen, and dislodged her hat, which fell to the floor. With a little cry she clapped



## Mrs. Batt

both hands to her head with the very evident intention of concealing the fact that part of the hair hidden by the hat was black and glossy.

Donald jumped to rescue the fallen head-gear, but Mr. Batt, who had been unconsciously edging nearer the performers, was before him. Quick as a flash he picked up the hat and set it askew on his wife's head. Then, with sudden change of purpose, he plucked it off again, and with a muttered "Bow, Mis' Batt, bow," bent his own head before the audience.

"Goodness me! That Batt woman is Sylvia!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, turning to her husband to find him wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. "Stephen, I believe you knew it all the time."

"Yes, I helped. And Jane, bless her heart, was so afraid we should laugh and hurt Mrs. Batt's feelings."

"Sylvia Browning, I've just been unhappy because I thought you were in bed with a headache," said Carol, rushing up to her friend, closely followed by Jane, who in the general excitement had quite forgotten that she was in costume.

"Sylvy, you never told us you could sing a note; in fact, I'm quite positive you said you couldn't," she declared in the tone of one having a real grievance.

"Well, I couldn't—at least, I thought I couldn't."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

I didn't find out until—oh, I'll tell you all about it later." Sylvia, flushed and nervous, was trying to escape from so central a position.

"Say, Mis' Janes, you're holdin' up the show, and givin' yourself away," drawled Mr. Batt in his mildest voice.

"Spinksy Stuart, why didn't I know it was you right off?" Jane glanced from her twin to her costume, and fled to the shelter of the little room. "Hurry and get ready, Spinksy," she called, "or you'll be the one that's holding up the show."

"Davy, where is your front tooth, and what have you done to your hair?" Mrs. Stuart's distress was half-genuine, for she hated to see her good-looking boy transformed in such a way.

"It's all right, mother," said Mr. Batt, making his way to where she sat, and smiling with an abandon that showed the apparent loss of several teeth. "They're all there. I'll go up now, and bleach my hair, and wash off a few of my eyebrows. Say, mother," he ended, in a confidential tone, "isn't Sylvia's voice a corker?"

"I should think it was," answered mother, who was as much astonished as any one, and then David strode off to make ready for his next performance.

Then came the second surprise of the evening, for another screen was placed in the middle of the imaginary stage, and Rob announced Signor



## Mrs. Batt

Stanislaus Olivoilo and his famous menagerie of invisible birds and animals. There was a little silence, after which from behind the screen came the soft night twittering of birds; then the stronger early-morning songs, and the cawing of crows and blackbirds. Sparrows chirped; a robin gave his rain-call. "Bob White" announced his name, first softly, as from a distance, then near at hand with distinct good-fellowship.

Uncle Stephen applauded. "That's perfect," he said clearly, as though he wanted the hidden "Bob White" to hear and be encouraged.

Then a kitten mewed forlornly, a dog barked, and a parrot gave a sharp, sudden scream that made Miss Lily Tinkle respond with an answering one. And then, when all was quiet again, came the loud shrill whinny of a horse.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, to the great delight of Kenneth, "if that horse gets loose I shall be run over."

Mrs. Stuart noticed that when Stanley came from behind the screen to bow his thanks for the applause he looked more boyishly happy than he had for some time, and she smiled, and held her hands high, and clapped so that he could not fail to see her.

After this a Swedish Folk-Dance by the two Twinninis was announced, and Mrs. Stuart took



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

her place at the piano. It was a dance Jane and David had learned for a school entertainment in Sterling, and they footed it well, as Uncle Stephen said.

"I can't tell which to admire most, the way they look or the way they take the steps," Miss Tinkle said with enthusiasm turning to Aunt Caroline and quite forgetting her awe of that little lady.

"It's rather a remarkable combination, isn't it?" Aunt Caroline responded with a laugh. "Two blonde Italians—if one may judge by the name—doing a Swedish dance."

"That's so," agreed Rob, who had overheard the remark. "They ought to call themselves the Twinsens. And now, ladies and gentlemen, as the entire company will take part in the last number on our program, I'm going to announce it immediately, and ask you to wait with patience while we are making our preparations for it. It is a moving-picture play in three films, entitled 'Young Lochinvar.'"

There was a short pause during which the audience conversed, and mysterious sounds issued from the hidden region at the other end of the room. Then the screens were drawn away disclosing great bunches of weeds to represent bushes, and queerly-shaped masses on the floor, which, to



## Mrs. Batt

a helpful imagination, might stand for rocks. In the center of the scene a long strip of dark green cambric was being wavily agitated in the most lifelike manner. Followed, a clattering sound, and Rob appeared, astride a broomstick, wearing a cloak, high boots, and a plumed hat. With marvelous horsemanship he leaped over rocks and bushes, and at length plunged his fiery steed into the green river, which had grown excited, and was rising in billows mountain-high. For a moment he was seen swimming valiantly, and then the screens hid him from view.

There was a hurried rearrangement behind the scenes, some one played the Wedding March very softly, and then the screens were withdrawn to disclose a double stage effect. On one side a small tree stood firmly anchored, and to it were tethered three brooms. A placard near by announced in huge letters, "This is the courtyard."

Only a piece of clothes-line served as a wall between out-of-doors and the banqueting hall, where stood a table gay with paper flowers, and glittering with tinware. There was a powdery-pale, but lovely bride whose costume consisted chiefly of a lace curtain; a haughty mother, resplendent in a towering head-dress, who seemed to want to manage everything and everybody. At one moment the white-haired father glared at his



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

daughter with an expression meant to indicate affection; at another, he tried to cheer up the bridegroom, who, continually scorned by his fair bride, acquired more and more a hangdog air as the festivities progressed. The guests, though only three in number, contrived to give the air of a large assemblage. They walked around as though the limited space were the floor of a ballroom, and conversed without sound, and drank innumerable healths.

Suddenly the music, before this soft and unobtrusive, stopped with a crash, and the wedding party stared apprehensively in the direction of the courtyard. Not being able to see beyond the clothes-line they could not guess what to expect, but the audience could see the arrival of the brave horseman, who rode in without a drop of water on him after swimming the tempestuous river. He strode boldly into the banqueting hall, and at sight of him, the pale bride fainted in her father's arms, the haughty mother advanced to meet the unexpected guest with a threatening frown, and the craven bridegroom turned upon his heel and slunk away.

The bride was revived, and the stranger knight advanced to bow before her. She lifted a tin dipper from the table, kissed it and gave it to him. Whereupon he almost went over backward



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in his effort to drain it to the last drop. The bride's father tried to challenge the intruder to mortal combat, but was ignored. The proud mother went from guest to guest, and endeavored without success to stir the cowardly bridegroom into action.

Then a waltz was played softly, and the uninvited guest claimed the hand of the fair bride for a last dance. The mother protested violently, but they whirled away, each turn bringing them nearer the clothes-line. Once beyond that, the knight carefully made his choice of brooms, and he and his lady pranced away.

Not until they were out of sight did the bride's startled relatives come to their senses. Then they, too, mounted and were off in swift pursuit. The bridegroom, whose horse sported a large pink bow, went with great reluctance, but at last he, also, disappeared from view.

"I think Carol will make a perfectly lovely bride—if she ever gets the chance," remarked Judy audibly, as the screens obscured the banqueting hall. "But Jane's a fright in that awful head-dress."

"My dear child, those are my perfectly good plumes, which those two young persons cajoled me into letting them take," said Aunt Caroline.

"Well," began Judy, rather abashed at having



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

criticized her aunt's possessions, "I mean ——" and then the withdrawal of the screens relieved her from further explanation.

This time the scene was unchanged, but a placard announced that twenty-four hours had gone by. The lady guests, still in their wedding finery, sat half asleep in attitudes of great dejection, but the mother, frowning fiercely, paced the floor. To them returned wearily the father and the one guest, supporting between them the limp bridegroom in a state of fatal collapse. There was excited gesticulation on the part of the ladies, and a mournful wagging of heads on the part of the men. Then the proud mother fainted effectively, and the play was over.

"Now will the guests please come into the dining-room, and we'll drink the health of the bride in lemonade, and not out of a tin dipper," invited Aunt Caroline, leading the way briskly.

"Why, how lovely," cried Jane, recovering consciousness at once. "You never told us we were going to have refreshments, Aunt Caroline."

"What's a party without something to eat, I should like to know?" demanded Aunt Caroline. "And after our feelings have been so harrowed, too."

"Mine weren't," remarked Judy in all seriousness. "I knew just how it was coming out."



## Mrs. Batt

"And was it you I heard saying that I shall make a dandy bride—if I ever have the chance?" asked Carol, trying to frown, and giggling instead. "The idea of doubting me!"

"Well—some very nice people aren't married, are they, Miss Tinkle?" Judy had an unfortunate habit of making a practical application of her ideas, and Jane hastened to change the subject.

"My, but this pink lemonade tastes good," she murmured. "I was so thirsty and so warm."

"I should think you would be with that mountain of hair and all that stuff on the top of your head," remarked David crushingly. "Do go and take it off."

"All right. Anything to oblige," and setting down her glass, Jane took off the rampant plumes and released the heavy golden braid. "There, you can't say I don't do everything I can to please you. And as a friend I solemnly advise you not to call my head-dress 'stuff' before Aunt Caroline."

"How women can see anything beautiful in feathers like that——" began David, but was cut short in his eloquence as Carol, in passing, neatly popped a small cake into his mouth.

"They're stylish, boy, and they don't need to be beautiful," she remarked blithely, and David having his mouth full, and no eye for style, merely grunted in response.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

It was not late when the guests left in the automobile, but Carol, standing with the other Rivercrofters on the piazza, yawned sleepily as she watched them depart.

"I'm for bed. I'm too sleepy to sit up another minute," she announced, leading the way back into the house, and sinking limply into the first big armchair that came in her way. "Come on, girls, let's go early to-night."

"All right," agreed Jane, and then she happened to look at mother who, in her turn, was gazing reflectively at the disorder of the room. "Oh, goodness, I forgot," she said in dismay. "I suppose we've got to put this room to rights, haven't we, mumsey?"

"Mercy!" groaned Carol. "I'm asleep—I'm dreaming—it would be dangerous to disturb me."

"I'll do Carol's part," Judy hastened to say, hoping that if she were busy her mother wouldn't think to send her to bed.

"Good for you, Judy. We'll all help," and Stan began a vigorous onslaught on the tinware which decked the bridal feast.

Every one took a hand except Carol, who pretended to be sleeping soundly. Uncle Stephen, standing where he could see all that went on, watched the girls especially, and decided that Carol was inclined to be a shirk; that Sylvia was



## Mrs. Batt

rather dreamy and inefficient, and that Jane and Molly and Judy were energetic workers who made their heads save their heels.

"There, mother, any criticisms?" asked Jane, when the room had assumed something approaching its usual state of neatness.

"It looks well enough," said Uncle Stephen, forestalling any comment on the part of Mrs. Stuart. He went across the room as he spoke, with one hand in his pocket, jingling the contents suggestively, and looking at the girls with his twinkling smile.

"I'm going to present prizes to the girls who have done really efficient work in establishing order," he announced jokingly.

At the mention of prizes there was a murmur of protest from the boys, and Carol sat up suddenly, looking wholly awake. It was not that she cared for the money which she guessed Mr. Eliot was going to bestow, but it was fun to work for a prize, however small.

"Efficiency counts in these days," Uncle Stephen went on. "Progressive persons are trying to arrange the work of the world so that it may be done with the least expenditure of time and movement——"

"Hear! Hear!" interrupted Donald. "Grandfather's making a speech."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"You've made me forget how I was going on." Uncle Stephen eyed his tall grandson with severity. "Anyway these bright new quarters are going to Molly and Jane and Judy. They may spend them or keep them for souvenirs."

"Where—where do I come in?" ventured Sylvia, when the prizes had been distributed. "I thought I was working awfully hard, and, at least, I didn't go to sleep."

"You were working hard," agreed Mr. Eliot solemnly. "I saw you pick up the same thing at least four times, hold it for a moment with a dreamy look in your eyes, and then put it down in a different place. But, as you hint, that was better than sitting in an easy-chair all the time."

"O-oh," moaned Carol, burying her face in the depths of the big chair. "'No one to love me.'"

"I was dreaming—I admit it." Sylvia's eyes held the lovely, exultant light which transformed her. "But I shan't need any souvenir to make me remember to-day. If you had once been perfectly forlorn except that you could sing a little—if you had lost it because you were ill, and had tried and tried until you were sure you could never chirp another note—and then your voice had suddenly come back as mine did to me this morning—— Oh, Mr. Eliot, there are many ways to be efficient,



## Mrs. Batt

aren't there? And if I work hard, perhaps ——” her voice lingered over the last word and then stopped, but her shining eyes told what she was thinking and hoping.

No one of them had ever seen quiet Sylvia so stirred before, and for an instant there was a silence so full of feeling that each one hesitated to be the first to break it.

Then a high-pitched voice drawled mildly, “Go it, Mis' Batt. I'll stay to home and do the housework, while you're gittin' lessons on the voice.”

“Good for you, Mr. Batt. That's the proper spirit,” laughed Uncle Stephen, and then they all praised Sylvia and asked her questions until she glowed like a rose.

“Hilda and I are sure that you can do a great deal with that voice, Sylvia,” Mrs. Stuart said at last with her arm around the girl. “You must have had some training already.”

“It was my cousin who had lessons,” confessed Sylvia. “No one knew that I hid behind a screen almost every time, and that there was a mirror where I could see everything the teacher did. And afterward, in my own room, I'd try to make the sounds just as he said. It was about the only pleasure I had,” she ended tremulously.

“Sylvy, I just love that little girl you were,” Jane said earnestly. “I'm always wishing you



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

could have met mother when you were so little and forlorn." She stopped, half-frightened at her own frankness, for this was the first time Sylvia had been willing to talk of that other life which she seemed anxious to forget.

"Even that wouldn't have done any good, for I was hateful and unfriendly, and ran away from people," answered Sylvia in a tone of deep conviction. "But now I'm cured, and I'm happy, and when this summer is over I'm going to take lessons and really learn how to sing."

"Come to bed, children," said Carol, who for once had listened without saying a word. "Miss Sylvia Melba-Tetrazzini's a song-bird, Jane's bound to be an artist, Molly can turn her hand to anything, and I haven't a talent to my name. I'm green with envy."

"An artist!" repeated Jane, with the quickened breath that always came with that word. "I wish I were as sure of it as I used to be. I'm just beginning to suspect what it means to accomplish a big thing like that," and then, with a sudden good-night, she was out of the room and on her way up-stairs.



## CHAPTER X

### OLD RUGS

"THIRTY—forty," called Jane with her racquet poised for the serve. Then she dropped her arm. "Robert Randall, if you get this game it'll be the third set for you, and I won't stand for it."

"What you going to do about it?" queried Rob, whose red hair looked redder than ever with the sun on it. His brown eyes were laughing, but the rest of his face was paying sober, respectful attention to Jane's remarks. "I'll tell you, Lady Jane. Finish this set, and in the future I'll play easy with you. It isn't really fair to give girls such swipes as I've been giving you."

"Oh, fudge! I want you to swipe 'em. I will not have allowances made because I'm a girl. I'm going to pull this game out now, and then work for the set. Ready!" and with a vicious drive Jane served her first ball—into the net. "Horrors! This next one is going over." And it did. Not only over the net, but over the line of the court Rob was guarding.

Jane picked up the third ball and drove it spitefully at Rob, who was helpless with laughter.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Good shot!" gasped her intended victim, as the ball struck cleanly inside the court, and shot along the ground without a bounce. "I never could have got that back. Say, it would be a great scheme always to aim at me when you serve."

Jane giggled. "I never can stay mad with you, Rob. You're so foolish, I have to laugh."

"'Laugh and the world laughs with you,'" quoted Rob aptly. "It's time to rest now, and then we'll play another set if you like. Here, stick your arms into this sweater. There's a nice cool breeze for a July morning."

"It's perfect under this tree." Jane sat down on the encircling seat and put her back against the tree. "Isn't it clear to-day? I could see everything going on at Silver House if there weren't so many things in the way."

"I suppose they're doing just about as usual," murmured Rob lazily. He had stretched himself at full length on the dry grass and tilted his cap over his eyes. "I'm glad Martin's man is so much better now that your mother doesn't have to stay over there any more. Nothing seems quite the same when she isn't here."

"I know it." Jane loved having mother so popular with all the girls and boys. "Oh, my goodness, what time is it, Rob? Mother and



## Old Rugs

Aunt Caroline and Judy were going to start at half-past nine for a long automobile ride."

"Eleven minutes and a quarter past ten."

"Too late. I hate to have mother go off without saying good-bye to her." Jane sank back on the seat again looking a little troubled, but a moment later her eyes twinkled. "Oh, Rob, Aunt Caroline was so funny this morning after you boys left the table. She still insists Martin's man is an agent, and she pretends now to believe that he's a great deal better than he seems to be, and that he's only waiting to find out all about us before he begins to sell—whatever he has to sell."

"I can't see why some one doesn't ask him who he is and where he belongs. He seems all right to me, except that he shies whenever any one approaches that subject."

"That's what Aunt Caroline thinks, and she'd like to be the one to ask, but Uncle Stephen won't let her. He says mother's the best one to do it, and I believe she means to try when she goes over there to-morrow, though she wouldn't promise."

Jane was silent for a while, her dreamy gaze following the hazy line of mountains in the distance. Nearer at hand were broad fields and masses of trees, and at the foot of the hill on which they sat the silver thread of the river glittered in the sunshine.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

“Martin says the river tells him stories about mothers and fathers—and relatives,” Jane said softly. “He always puts in—‘and relatives,’ as if he were bound to be satisfied with whatever he could get.

“I believe you’re asleep,” she went on, trying to see Rob’s eyes, but baffled by the cap which shaded them. “Let’s have another go at tennis unless you’re afraid to spoil your record. You needn’t think just because I’m down now I’m going to stay down. I’m all—— Oh, my goodness, I wonder if I’ve forgotten——” and then for a moment or two, Rob heard a monotonous muttering which was perfectly unintelligible to him.

“Great Cæsar’s ghost! What’s happening?” He raised himself on one elbow, and then sat up straight in his perplexity. Jane held up a warning finger and continued to mumble.

“There!” she exclaimed a second later with an air of extreme satisfaction. “I’ve got it!”

“Glory! Is it catching?”

“I don’t know. It might be. You’d better look out. No, I was afraid I’d forgotten some poetry mother gave Spinksy and me this morning. Something I said made me think of it. You see mother’s always finding nice little trumpety things for Spinksy and me to learn.”



## Old Rugs

"Trumpery?" questioned Rob, lying down, and again pulling his hat over his eyes.

"I said 'trumpety.'" Jane's manner was severe. "I call them that when just saying them over makes you feel like—well, like being the—the bravest thing you can imagine."

"Go ahead; spout it. Perhaps I might want to learn it, too. I shall need it if I'm going to play tennis with you."

"No, you won't. You're only guying me when you talk like that. And you'd probably make fun of it if I were foolish enough to say it for you."

"You know better than that, Jane Stuart. I may be a good deal of an idiot at times, but I wasn't brought up to make fun of good things any more than you and David were." Rob was sitting up now with the concealing cap fallen off, and a distinctly aggrieved expression in his nice brown eyes. "Please, Lady Jane," he murmured coaxingly.

"I wish I'd never said a word about it," Jane said half sulkily. "Lie down then, and put your cap over your eyes. I will not be looked at."

"Yes'm. You shan't be," and Rob resumed the prescribed position with an expectant look on his boyish face.

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,"



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

began Jane falteringly, and stopped. Then, inspired by the spirit of the poetry, she started again, and said the whole thing through strongly, and as if she loved it.

“One who never turned his back, but marched  
breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed though right were  
worsted, wrong would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to  
fight better,  
Sleep to wake.”

The clear voice trembled a little over the last words, but Jane's head was high, and her eyes were shining. “There,” she said, after a moment of silence during which she expected some remark and did not get it, “you made me tell you, and now I hope you're satisfied.”

“Perfectly. Only don't go and spoil it all by being huffy, Mrs. Janes,” he wheedled. “It's great, and I know exactly what you mean by calling it ‘trumpety.’ I'm quite sure I'd rather ——” he hesitated so long that Jane was tempted to speak, but didn't. “I'd rather any one would blow trumpets at me when I'm down than pity me,” he ended with some constraint.

“So should I. I hate to be pitied.”

There was another silence before Rob spoke



## Old Rugs

again. Then with a lazy indifference which Jane knew instinctively to be assumed he remarked, "Say, Lady Jane, I wish you and old Davy would let me belong to your poetry alliance. You know I haven't any twin, and mother—well, mother doesn't go in for poetry very much."

"All right. You're elected a member by a unanimous vote of one. Only don't think there's anything exciting about it. We learn the things, and then sometimes, when we're all together, we see who can remember the most. I'd copy some of my favorites for you, only you'd have to have a key to go with my handwriting."

Rob laughed. "Why don't you change it? I don't see any use in writing that sprawly, pointed stuff that's enough to give any one brain fag to read. Anyway, if you'll let me take that quotation you spouted just now I'll typewrite it."

"I think it's very forgiving of me when you talk so about my stylish handwriting, but I will. How are you getting on with your typewriting, Rob?"

"Oh, fairly well. I can do thirty words a minute. And I should be quite proud of my shorthand if I could only read it after I've written it."

"But you'll get your ten dollars, won't you?" Jane knew that Rob's father had offered him that amount for a certain degree of proficiency.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"You bet I will." Rob sprang up and squared his shoulders as though ready to tackle anything in the way of a task. "Ready for another set, Lady Jane? I'll give you choice of court—and serve."

"No, sir. We'll toss for it, as we always do. And you've got to promise that you'll play just as if I were a boy, or I won't play at all."

"All right. Rough or smooth?" Rob tossed his racquet. "Smooth it is, and you get the shady court. Now, look out for yourself."

Perhaps the little rest had done Jane good. At any rate, fortune aided her to such an extent that the game stood four-three in her favor, with her next serve, when Kenneth came running toward the court waving something which suggested a flag of truce, but proved to be a note from Susan Trot.

Jane skimmed through it hastily. "Dear me! All sorts of troubles. I'll have to go over," she said disappointedly. "Mr. Prescott away for the day. Hilda gone to bed with a headache, and Susan's just scalded her hand. Well, anyway, there's a chance I might have beaten you, Rob."

"Why don't you get Molly to go?" suggested Rob. "She's older than you. And Sylvia lived there the first week. She ought to know just how to help out."



## Old Rugs

"For goodness' sake don't say anything that would make it easier for me to stay away," Jane went on half-irritably, as they started toward the path that led to Silver House. "But I'm going anyway," she added hastily, omitting to mention that Susan had written, "Please come yourself if you can, Miss Jane. I'm more used to you than I am to the other girls."

"Stan's over there taking care of the children," announced Ken, as if it were an every-day occurrence.

"Stan! Well, of all things!"

"I'll go over, too, Lady Jane, and perhaps you can keep me busy," Rob said in his laziest way.

"All right. You can help me get dinner. And by the same token we'd better hurry, for those children are the hungriest things."

"Just before I left Stan fixed each of them a slice of bread and butter with a little—thin—sugar on top," Kenneth said reminiscently. "It looked awful good, but, of course, that was just for the babies." His face indicated that it required some self-repression to put oneself in the grown-up class at such a time.

"Well, of all things!" Jane said again. "We've got to hustle to keep up with Stanley. Come on; let's hurry," and she was off at a brisk trot with the two boys following closely.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Just before they disappeared from sight Carol in a summery green linen ran out on the piazza of the big house and caught the last glimpse of the retreating figures.

"Jane! Oh, Jane! Wa-it!" she called. And then again, "Jane! Oh, Jane!" The last "Jane" was decidedly a cross one, but nothing broke the silence in response except a low chuckle from the parrot.

"You ridiculous bird, stop laughing at me. I won't have it," said Carol, stamping her foot.

"Tst—tst—tst. Keep cool!" The parrot swung herself into another position and cocked her head at Carol. Then, in a tone of made-up sweetness, "Pretty girl. Pretty—pretty—pretty ——"

"If you put in too many 'pretties' I shan't believe you." By this time Carol was so much absorbed that she failed to hear footsteps in the front hall. "Stop it," she added, as the parrot went on with her complimentary remarks in the same sugary-sweet voice. "Stop it! You're just talking to hear yourself talk, and not because you're impressed by my beauty!"

"Pretty—pretty Cora!" ended the parrot with guttural emphasis, and then there was a burst of laughter, and Carol turned to find David looking at her.

"Did you ever get left?" he demanded mali-



## Old Rugs

ciously. "It was her own beauty she was in raptures over, not yours."

"I don't care. She's made me feel almost good-natured again. I'm really in a terrible grouch."

"What's the matter now?"

"Don't say 'now' in that tone of voice. You sound as if I were always grouchy. I'm just lonesome, and I don't like the country. Jane's gone off without me, Sylvia's trying over some songs with Don strumming on his guitar, and Molly wants to finish a book. I wish I'd been born a bookworm, or an athletic sort of girl, or had some kind of a talent."

"Perhaps you have."

"Nonsense! If I had it would show, silly."

"Stop calling me names, and come and play with me." David's good-nature was soothing, and Carol's frown departed. "Mother asked me to do an errand for her at Miss Tinkle's, and I've forgotten it until this moment. Wait till I dash up-stairs and get my paper of instructions."

Carol walked over to the steps, and stood meditating. She had had no special interest in Miss Tinkle and her sister up to now, but this morning she felt a certain kinship of spirit because they were lonesome and so was she. "I just want something doing all the time," she confessed to herself. "I suppose I ought to be able to sit down sometimes and keep still the way the others can."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"I'm glad to find some one who isn't busy," said David, coming out on the piazza again. "I've been doing some writing for Uncle Stephen, and I felt rather queer myself till I found you and Cora. Funny, isn't it, how we all do things together for days at a time, and then a day comes when some of us go off by our lonesomes."

"Uh-huh. That's what makes me grouchy. I never want to be alone. I don't like to do things by myself."

"Don't you ever like to get off by yourself and—and kind of think things out?" queried David after they had walked a little way in silence. "I do."

"No. I have to sometimes, but I never like it," confessed Carol with a little sigh. "I want to keep going all the time, and having fun. I don't really care much for reading. You'll think that's dreadful, because you and Jane are so crazy about it."

David winced a little at that, then laughed. "Jane says I'm a freak about wanting the people I like to like what I like. My! three 'likes' in one sentence. What would our new English teacher say? Anyway, we can't all want to do the same thing. I should hate fussing over clothes, for instance, and I've heard you say you love it. Say—why isn't that your talent?" he ended with sudden decision.



## Old Rugs

"Oh, pooh, dressmaking."

"Well, why not?" David was noted in his own family for his persistency in following out an idea that pleased him. "Now, look here. If a man had your talent he'd open an—an establishment, and pretty soon all the women that could afford it would be flocking to Paris to have him make dresses for them. I know 'em."

"Dear me, how wise we are. How did you ever find out so much? Anyway, I don't want to be a dressmaker."

"Well," began David, in no wise discouraged by this flat refusal, "perhaps the very thing that makes you like to fuss over dresses would help you about doing something else. Oh, you needn't look so scornful. Mother and I have discussed this thing a lot, because we're trying to decide what I shall have a try at, so I know what I'm talking about."

"I never heard anybody so high and mighty as you are this morning, Mr. David Spinksy Stuart," murmured Carol. "I don't dare to say my soul's my own."

"I've just been having a great old talk with Uncle Stephen, that's why," explained David with perfect frankness. "You really have to begin early to plan what you're going to do."

"Oh, well, it's different with boys. Of course



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

they have to." They had reached the stone wall by this time, and conversation stopped while Carol surmounted it with David's help.

"You needn't tell me my shoes are too thin and the heels too high," she said hastily as they started off again. "I hear that from one of you boys almost every day and I'm tired of it."

"I hadn't thought of mentioning it this time," David answered with a grin. "But they are, of course." Then, going back to the previous subject, "I don't see why girls ought not to plan ahead as well as boys. Jane's going to. And even if your father does have plenty of money it doesn't make any difference. What else do you like to do besides fuss over clothes?"

"Oh, goodness, I don't know. Shop, I guess, and change all the furniture around once in a while, and help mother plan sofa pillows, and select draperies."

"I have it." David's manner was profoundly wise. "Now—ahem—now that you've consulted me about this important matter, I'm going to make an interior decorator of you."

"Wha-at?"

"An interior decorator," David repeated calmly. "I know about 'em, because one of mother's friends does all kinds of stunts that way. She came out to see mother in the spring, and she told some





THEY HAD REACHED THE STONE WALL







## Old Rugs

mighty interesting stories about the houses she'd done. You have to know an awful lot about furniture and rugs and a whole raft of other things, so you'd better begin right away."

"David Stuart, you're certainly the most absurd lad I know. It would take me a million years to know enough to do anything of that kind."

"Well, then in a thousand years or so I'll mention it to you again and see how far along you've got," responded David, quite unmoved by her lack of interest. "Hello," he went on under his breath, "what are 'Tinkle Sisters' up to now?"

As they approached they could see that the bare, unattractive house stood unusually open to sun and breeze, and that there was a great airing of mattresses and pillows going on. Through one of the upper windows the sound of a hymn-tune, sung in a strong, high-pitched voice floated out. Down-stairs, Miss Lily Tinkle's smiling face peered through the screen door, and a hearty welcome awaited them.

"Well, now, we're glad to see any one from your house, though we do seem to be in an awful muss," she said happily. "We're gettin' ready for company," she went on with some mystery of manner, "and we're goin' to try to make it look homelike for them."

"Mother gave me this paper to bring over to



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

you, Miss Lily," David said as they sat down for a few minutes in the sitting-room. "She said you were going to order something for her from town, and that would tell you all about it."

"Oh, yes, let me see. Hm! Yes, I'll attend to it directly," and Miss Lily unconsciously assumed a very businesslike manner as she glanced through the paper. Then she looked around the room with her ever-ready laugh. "This is 'bout the only place that's decent, and I s'pose Sister'll have this turned out before long."

"Spring cleaning?" ventured David, not knowing just what else to say.

"No-o, not exactly." Miss Lily glanced furtively toward the hall, as though suspecting that her sister might appear. But that good lady was busily engaged in sweeping to the tune of "Onward, Christian Soldiers," and there seemed no immediate prospect that she would march in their direction.

"We did think we wouldn't say anything about it," Miss Lily went on with some hesitation, "but I kind of think we might get some ideas from you. You see, we've been so pleased with what Miss Sylvia and Miss Prescott are doin' for those children, 'specially for that dear little boy who'd never seen the country, that we thought we might try it, too. So we're goin' to stay another month 'stid of goin' back to the store, and we've written to ask



## Old Rugs

two girls to come for the first half of August and two for the last half." She paused from apparent exhaustion, and looked at them beamingly.

"That's just fine," said Carol. "And after they come you won't be lonesome any more."

"No, nor before, because we shall have so much to do to get ready. We're only goin' to try to fix up two bedrooms this summer, but the house is big, and next summer——" Miss Lily left her sentence unfinished, as though silenced by the joyous possibilities which her imagination unfolded.

"I was just goin' up in the attic when I saw you," she went on a moment later. "Our aunt was the greatest for buyin' things and puttin' 'em away in trunks, and I told Sister there might be somethin' that would do for curtains and splashers and bedspreads."

"We mustn't keep you," began David, but found himself utterly in the background, for Carol was imploring Miss Lily to take her up into the garret.

"Please do ; I just love to see old trunks opened," she urged. "David can wait for me down here, or he may go home if he likes." She turned to David with one of her sudden mischievous smiles, as if to assure him of his absolute unimportance.

"I'd like you to go up. I'd like your advice. And perhaps Mr. David wouldn't mind comin',



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

too. The trunks are pretty heavy to move around," Miss Lily suggested shyly.

"I'm glad muscle counts for something, Carol Heath," David said in an aggrieved tone, while they waited for Miss Lily to prepare her sister for the invasion. "You needn't think you're going to get me way over here and then drop me like—like ——"

"A torpedo," suggested Carol. "If I dropped you, you'd 'go off,' wouldn't you? Yes, Miss Lily, we'll come right up."

Miss Tinkle, with her head picturesquely tied up in a cloth, met them at the top of the stairs. "Lily says she's told you, and that you think it's a good idea," she said with an eagerness that made her seem singularly youthful. "It will be splendid if you'll help her decide 'bout fixin' up the rooms. You see, you'll know what girls will like. And all these girls have had to live dreadfully crowded at home, without much chance for makin' things pretty."

"There are the rooms," said Miss Lily, throwing open the door of one of them.

It was a square room of fair size, with a red carpet on the floor, bright red paper on the walls, and a big bedstead which seemed to take more than its share of space. Carol's heart sank at sight of the ugliness of it all. It never could look pretty to a girl, she was sure.



## Old Rugs

"The other's about the same," Miss Tinkle remarked. "Of course two girls could sleep in that bed, but this summer we're goin' to let 'em spread out. This room gets the afternoon sun, and you ought to see this red paper light up."

Carol smiled faintly. "It's nice to have so many windows," she said, trying to see the hopeful side.

"Yes, and we're goin' to have 'em all screened from top to bottom," said Miss Tinkle firmly. "That's one thing we've found not far from here—a man who makes screens—and he drove over the other day to get the order."

Miss Lily apologized for the looks of the garret. "Aunt was the greatest for buyin' and storin' I ever saw," she repeated helplessly as they reached the top of the stairs. "You can't hardly get 'round, but you two take a look while I find that trunk I just got a peep into the other day."

Carol led David a merry chase while she took a swift survey of the crowded attic from one end to the other. She insisted upon poking in under the eaves, and David had to come to the rescue more than once when she was caught by the hair on the splinters protruding from the beams. His was no easy task, for he tried to keep an eye on Miss Lily, and be ready with a helping hand when she needed it. Whenever he was with her, however, Carol



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

was sure to give a little shriek, but, by the time he had reached her, she had darted away from the object which caused her emotion, and would give no explanation.

"I've found it," Miss Lily called at last. "I thought I was goin' to be able to put my hand on it the first thing. Now, I'll spread out this sheet, and lay the things on it."

David whistled softly as Miss Lily took out pieces of muslin and silk and other materials he didn't know the name of. "Jiminy! I should think you had curtains enough for a hotel," he ventured, feeling that some one ought to say something in praise, and wondering why Carol was so quiet.

"There, that's the end of them," Miss Lily said, diving into the trunk for the last time.

"Why, you've got enough to—to do almost anything with," said Carol, finding her voice at last. "Why, I can just see—can just see"—she stopped with a little frown, and waited an instant before going on—"at least, I could see something perfectly charming if that red carpet didn't get right up and hide everything else. Oh, Miss Lily, wouldn't you be willing to have that taken up and the floor painted?"

Miss Lily looked bewildered. "Why, yes, I should. We'll see what Sister says. Come to



## Old Rugs

think of it that red carpet's awful hot-looking, and hard to sweep."

"I peeked into a bundle of perfectly fascinating old-fashioned rugs over the other side of the room, and Jane and Mr. Prescott love to paint things, and they could do the floor. Oh, Miss Lily, if you and your sister would only let me help about fixing the room.

"Don't say anything now," she begged before Miss Lily could have time to answer, "but please think it over. I've seen enough in this attic to help out on two perfectly darling rooms, and I want to go home and plan about it." Carol's cheeks were rosy with excitement, and her ruffled, wavy hair stood out around her head. "I'll come over to-morrow morning the first thing and find out what you've decided," she went on, starting for the head of the stairs. "Of course, I know I'm poking myself in shamefully, but, if you decide you don't want me, just say so, and I'll march straight home."

She was so absorbed in her creative visions that she walked directly out of the house, and forgot to say good-bye to the Tinkle Sisters until she heard David doing so in what she fancied was rather a pointed manner. Then she blushed, and apologized so sweetly that both sisters wondered why they hadn't felt better acquainted with her before.

"David, I saw two small iron beds in the attic



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

that would need only to be painted," Carol began glowingly as soon as they were out of hearing. "And those rugs were wonderful. Mother has been looking for one of that kind for a year. But oh, that red wall-paper! It would give me a nightmare to sleep there. Now just imagine that room with a paper sprigged with roses—something like that dimity Miss Lily showed us—you remember it, don't you, David?"

"I remember—something," answered David slowly. He was from experience cautious when girls got excited.

"Well, never mind. Anyway that kind of a paper, and the floor painted pale gray; two or three of those rugs, and a white bed, and a toilet table draped with the dimity. Oh, David!"

"Sounds good enough to eat. Say, do you know, you talk just like that other one."

"That other what?"

"Why, that other interior decorator I was telling you about."

"Fudge! I don't. I'm not one," and Carol relapsed into an uncommunicative state of mind which lasted for some time, and resisted David's best attempts to keep up a cheerful conversation.

As they approached the house, she came to earth again with a little sigh. "I've got such a picture of those rooms in my mind," she said



## Old Rugs

looking straight at David as if she had just realized his presence. Suddenly her eyes widened and then crinkled into a laugh. "Mr. Batt, if I'm an inside decorator you're an outside one," she giggled. "That's why you looked so impressive when you were saying good-bye to Miss Tinkle, and trying to make me remember to be polite. You have two large smooches of attic dust on your face."

David walked up on the piazza laughing, and making a bad matter worse by trying to rub off some of the dirt.

"Pretty boy!" croaked the parrot, edging along her perch in an effort to get as near as possible.

"She means me!" David exulted. "I want you to understand that I'm beautiful even when smooched." And he walked into the house with a ridiculous imitation of Carol's high-heeled gait which that young lady herself refused to recognize.



## CHAPTER XI

### MARTIN'S MAN

IN the meantime, while David was doing his best to start Carol in the way she should go, Jane and the two boys had gone across the fields to Silver House. As they climbed the last wall and came out on Martin's road, they found that young person himself, gravely marching up and down in the grass beside the road, with a stick held gunwise against his shoulder.

"I'm on guard," he announced gravely. "Something's the matter with most every one, and I'm taking care of them."

"Good for you." There was a certain frank appeal in Martin's brown eyes which frequently tempted Jane to hug him, but she knew from experience with Kenneth that it was dangerous to interfere with persons at the full tide of imagination, and she merely saluted.

"Where's Stanley?" she asked with some curiosity.

Martin swung his stick in a half-circle until it was pointing toward the barn. "Over there somewhere. He's amusing Pansy and Peter."



## Martin's Man

"Say, old fellow, you must never point with a gun," Rob remarked in apparent alarm. "You might just as well get used to that idea while you're young."

"I'll tip the shooting end right down to the ground," said Martin, doing it as carefully as if Rob's protest had given a new reality to his weapon. "I think I won't play soldier any more. I'll go back to the house with you."

Jane, who had not waited for this interchange of remarks between Rob and the soldier, was almost at the back door when she stopped to meet the joyous welcome of Pansy and Peter, who came running around the corner of the house. Stanley was not in sight, and Jane had time to wonder where he was before Pansy reached her. The next moment, young Peter, much too fat to be a successful runner, toppled over, bumped his nose hard, and roared lustily.

"Oh, poor Peter! Let go of me, Pansy. I'm coming, Peter, I'm coming."

Susan Trot poked her head out of the kitchen window, and looked distressed at sight of the blood flowing from Peter's nose. From an upstairs window a pale face, surmounted by a thatch of reddish-brown hair, gazed anxiously down.

Jane almost had her hands on Peter when Stan-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

ley appeared from somewhere and picked him up bodily.

"Look out, Jane. You'll get your dress spotted," he said sharply, and then in what Jane afterward described as the nicest, most soothing way, he cuddled Peter and held his own handkerchief to the afflicted nose, and talked to him all the time as if he were a large and very brave boy. She could hardly believe her ears and eyes, because she had not known Stanley could be so gentle and consoling.

"I fink I'm 'most all wight now," said Peter with a pathetic catch in his breath, sitting up in Stanley's arms, and regarding his spotted fingers with horrified eyes.

"Come on in, Buster, and we'll wash up. Some cold water'll make your nose stop bleeding," and Stanley strode toward the door, with Jane and Pansy in close attendance.

"It's hospital morning," said Susan, meeting them just inside the door, and looking very unfamiliar with her ruddy color gone. "I'm thankful Miss Hilda's 'round the other side of the house, so she won't hear all the excitement."

"How's Martin's man?" queried Jane, when Peter had been made presentable, and comforted with a cookie.

"He's getting better every day. Mr. Prescott



## Martin's Man

helped him dress before he went away this morning, and he declares he feels well enough to come down-stairs." A sharp twinge of pain made Susan draw in her breath audibly. "I went up and got Mr. Man to put on this bandage for me," she continued, holding up her injured hand for Jane to see. "I explained to him that Miss Hilda had the headache, and he was terribly anxious that she shouldn't be disturbed. He tied my hand up beautifully. He's got the slenderest, skilfulest fingers."

"Doesn't he say one word yet about who he is?" questioned Stanley. He had started for the door, but stopped and turned back when the man up-stairs was mentioned.

"Not a whisper," averred Miss Trot solemnly. "I've tried to trick him into it a dozen times, but I can't. And when Mr. Prescott almost asked him right out the other day, he just looked kind of distressed, and pretended he didn't hear."

Stanley went out, taking Peter with him, and Jane looked at Susan with a new wonder in her eyes. "Isn't he great with the children?" she asked softly.

"Who, Stanley? Mercy, yes. The children are all crazy about him. 'Specially Martin. And now if you'll just help me get dinner I'll be a thousand times obliged. I hated to ask you, but



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

you know my ways, and my hand makes me kind of nervous."

"You needn't mind a bit asking me," Jane answered promptly, "but I wish mother were here to look after your hand. Are you sure you've done the right thing about it?"

"Yes, and the man up-stairs said I'd done the very best I could for it. I don't exactly see why I believed him, but he seemed to know what he was talking about. Anyway, it doesn't pain much, but I can't use it."

"Of course you can't. Now, let me have an apron and tell me what's to be done, and we'll play it's a lesson. Only nowadays, Susan, you're getting on so fast that I can't give you any lessons in exchange."

Susan looked gratified. "I'm never going to forget that it was you who started me on thinking I could be what I wanted to be," she said impressively. "And when I'm really a trained nurse I shall take care of you and all your family."

"Oh, Susan, here's hoping we shan't need you that way. I'm going to get the boys to shell these peas, wouldn't you?" And Jane hurried from the kitchen with basket and pan.

A moment later she appeared before Rob and Stanley who were having a friendly discussion over the latest type of air-ship, while Kenneth lis-



## Martin's Man

tened eagerly, and the children played not far away.

"Do you mind shelling these for me?" she asked, handing over her basket and pan as if an answer in the negative were unthinkable. "I'm sorry you can't eat them with us, but I suppose you're expected at Rivercroft, and it would never do for too many of us to be away."

"I'm going to stay here," Stanley announced with calm decision. "I've hired out as—as nursery governess for the day, and I sent word that I shouldn't be there for dinner when Kenneth went over for you."

Jane giggled. "What do you know about nursery governesses, please tell me. Anyway, I'm glad you're going to stay, because I shan't have to think about the children. And you can help me wash the dishes," she ended maliciously.

"Sure," agreed Stan with surprising amiability. "Only don't scold too hard if I break things."

"I did feel sorry I couldn't stay," began Rob, "but now you mention dishes—say, Lady Jane, I've discovered why you like to cook. It's because that blue apron is so becoming to you."

"Foolish!" said Jane, making up a little face at him. "I must go back, and please bring those as soon as you can. And don't get the empty pods and the peas all mixed in together. Talk about



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

something easy so that you can keep your mind on what you're doing."

Back again in the house, Jane put everything else out of her mind and plunged into work with great zeal. Before noon she could not help admitting in the privacy of her own mind that getting dinner on a July morning was not what she should choose for an occupation. "I could have played tennis, though, the whole morning and not have thought I was having a hard time," she assured herself with great honesty. "Such is life." Which was one of Jane's favorite conclusions. "The things you like to do don't seem hard."

Dinner was earlier than at Rivercroft, and Rob stayed until the last moment, and took a tray up-stairs to Martin's man.

"Say, Jane, he's coming along wonderfully," he remarked when he came down again. "He seems to take a great interest in the family, and he asked about Susan's hand and Miss Hilda's headache. I started to call him Mr. — something when I answered, and I got quite flustered, but he didn't take any notice."

"Queer, isn't it?" The family was seated at the table now, and Jane had just brought in the last hot dish. "I wish he would tell, so that we could let his family know. They must be worrying dreadfully."



## Martin's Man

"His mother, do you mean?" asked Martin, looking up with sudden eager interest.

"Yes, or his father, or perhaps his wife and children," Jane answered.

"Well, I must hustle," said Rob, tearing himself away with evident effort. "You're lucky, Stan, to be staying for this elegant dinner. Jane, you're certainly a winner on making things look fine, but I'm going to pretend all the way home that they don't taste good. Good-bye. See you later."

Before dinner was over fat Peter was so sleepy that he hardly knew the difference between his eye and his mouth as a receptacle for his spoon, and Stanley carried him off up-stairs to have a nap. Susan persuaded Pansy to follow without much protest, and then Stanley came back for Martin, who was obviously unwilling to depart, though his eyes looked sleepy.

"You've got to grow so that Mr. Chope can make another mark for you on the barn door," coaxed Kenneth, remembering the arguments used in his earlier days, "and lying down on summer days helps to do it, doesn't it, Stan?"

"You bet it does. Come on, I'll give you a ride up-stairs on my shoulder, Martin. Here, let me feel your muscle first. Now, I'll try it again after you've rested, and we'll see if it seems any stronger."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Jane looked after them as they went out of the room, the small red-brown head resting against the dark one, and a slender arm curled tight around the big boy's neck.

"How does it happen that Stan can do anything he likes with these children?" she asked Kenneth softly.

"Oh, he's been over here to play with them lots of times since you've been here." Kenneth slid out of his chair as he spoke, and prepared to start for the kitchen with some dishes. "I don't know what makes him like 'em so much. I guess it's 'cause they're so glad to see him."

Jane put off beginning to clear the table until she had slipped up-stairs with a cup of tea for Hilda, who was too weary after much pain to ask why she was there. On the way down she caught a glimpse through the open door of their stranger, and stopped to promise him a little visit later on.

When she got down-stairs Kenneth had taken almost all the dishes to the kitchen, and Stanley was tying on an apron preparatory to washing them.

"Stan says you're to get in the hammock," volunteered Kenneth, "and we'll do the dishes."

"Indeed I shan't. You don't expect me to take a nap so that I can grow more, do you? For goodness' sake, don't wish that on me this sum-



## Martin's Man

mer." Jane picked up the enveloping blue apron as she spoke, but Stanley took it away from her.

"No, you don't," he said firmly. "You had your turn getting dinner in the hottest part of the day, and it was a scrumptious one, too. There'll be more work to-night and to-morrow, I suppose, and ——"

"Oh, but there won't," Ken interrupted. "Not for us, 'cause Mr. Chope went over and asked Mrs. Batt to come and do the work till Susan's hand is well again. The real Mrs. Batt, I mean," he ended with a chuckle, "and she's coming this afternoon."

"In which case," said Jane stubbornly, "I'm not going to desert now. I'll put away the food, and you and Ken can get the dishes ready for the pan. Then I'll wash, and you can wipe, and we'll do it all in the whisk of a lamb's tail, as Mr. Chope says."

"That was a very spry kind of a lamb," said Ken a little later, when the last dish was wiped and put away. "I never saw one whisk his tail so fast."

"You and Stan and I are the clever little workers," said Jane, wondering if she were in duty bound to wash out the dish-towels, or whether she might leave that for Mrs. Batt. "I didn't know you were such a grand helper, Stan. Do you wipe dishes for Molly sometimes?"

"Well—not often." Stan hardly cared to ad-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

mit that in the past a request from his sister of a like service would probably have been refused.

"Does David do that sort of thing?"

"Oh, Spinksy and I go halves on all kinds of work, when we have to. Mother believes that boys ought to know how to do housework, and that girls should know as much as possible about business."

"What your mother says goes—with me," said Stan, half under his breath, and then fell to polishing a tin cover with a zeal that threatened to make a hole in the towel.

"You've got an awful crush on our mother, haven't you?" Kenneth remarked serenely. "So have I."

"So say we all of us," laughed Jane. "Much obliged for your very great help, gentlemen. Now I'm going to tiptoe up-stairs and see how Hilda and Susan are getting along, and then keep an ear out for the children while I'm making a little call on the mysterious stranger."

"I bet he'll be glad to see you," said Ken. "He looked awful lonesome when I went up to bring down the tray."

"I'll look out for Peter and Martin, Jane," Stanley said, as he and Ken started for out-of-doors. "That Pansy-girl is a little too much for me, though."



## Martin's Man

Jane made a low bow to the older boy's retreating back. "Somebody ought to take his temperature," she said to herself as she took off her apron and hung it up. "He's such a lamb I'm afraid he's coming down with an illness. I must be sure to tell Molly what a perfect trump he's been," and then she went softly up-stairs where following events drove Stanley quite out of her mind.

In the first room into which Jane peeped the two boys were both asleep, Peter curled into a bunch, and Martin lying straight and still like a beautiful little statue. Jane lowered the shade, for in a few minutes more the afternoon sun would be directly in his face, and then retreated in a panic, because he stirred and mumbled something. In the next room Miss Trot and Pansy were asleep, also, and the quiet observer drew a breath of relief.

"It will help Susan a lot to sleep for a while," she confided to Hilda, who, though she still looked very pale, was well enough now to be told of what had been going on. "And you don't need to get up until you feel just like it, for I'll stay, and Mrs. Batt is coming to get supper.

"I'm going now to visit—Mr. Man, as Susan calls him," she went on softly. "And perhaps if you have another nap you'll feel able to come down-stairs a little later. Poor Mr. Man seems



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

lonesome, Ken thinks. And Susan says he was quite distressed about your headache. I shall tell him you're looking much better."

And so she was, for even as Jane was talking a faint color had crept into her cheeks. "You really are looking better than when I came into the room," Jane reiterated with some surprise. "Don't you want me to brush your hair, or help you get dressed?"

"It's your visit that makes me look so," declared Hilda. "I really don't need any help, and you'd better go and comfort the lonely. I wish Fritz would get home," she went on with rather an anxious air; "he seems to know just how to make him feel more comfortable in his mind."

"Who? Oh, Mr. Man. Well, I'll go, and perhaps my foolishness will amuse him. I rattled off a lot of stories about Stuart happenings to him the other day, and he actually laughed several times. I think he might be rather jolly, don't you, if he could get over seeming so awfully troubled and mysterious."

"Perhaps. I don't know. Anyway, I'm sure he'll like to see you."

"Well, you seem to want to get rid of me, so I'll go. I love you just the same even if you don't want me. Au revoir," and kissing the tips of her fingers to the girl on the couch, Jane went out into



## Martin's Man

the hall, and started noiselessly toward the door of the stranger's room. The sound of a voice made her stop in surprise, but almost at once she realized that it was Martin talking, and she paused involuntarily to listen.

"But you know you ought to tell," the decided little voice said, and to Jane it sounded as if he were continuing an argument already well started, "'cause maybe your mother and father are terribly worried about you. Or, perhaps, it might be your wife and—and children."

"I wonder," said a deeper voice, in a tone which to Jane's ears seemed to hold all sorts of perplexity. "I wonder if my—my wife and children are worrying about me."

The girl outside the door stole a step nearer, and looked in through the crack. For once she was sure that it was quite excusable to listen, for it was really necessary to know, and he might be persuaded to tell Martin. She could see both of them from where she stood; the stranger sitting in the big chair, with his handsome head turned toward Martin, and the small boy looking rosy and refreshed after his nap.

"Why, of course," Martin affirmed positively. "Every one worries about relatives, I s'pose. I do."

"Boys don't usually worry about relatives.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

What makes you?" Jane fancied she could detect relief in the young man's manner, as if he were glad to transfer the conversation from himself to Martin.

"Oh, because I haven't got any, and I want some." The little sigh with which Martin ended was heartfelt. "When I found my road I thought sure I should find some relatives, but I haven't. You don't think you could be one, do you?"

"I wish with all my heart I could be, little chap."

Jane, still eavesdropping, could see that the color was rising in the stranger's face, and that his hands, the slender, skilful hands of which Susan had spoken, were twisted tightly. This would never do. His temperature would rise and he would have a collapse or a relapse, or whatever they called it. She must go in and send Martin away, and say the most soothing things she could possibly think of. Something that would take his mind at once from this disturbing subject. She stole half-way down the hall trying to collect her thoughts, but all she could do was to wonder what Martin was saying meanwhile. Then she walked boldly back, and into the room.

"I've come to make my visit now," she said brightly. "Martin, you scamper softly down-



## Martin's Man

stairs, and find Stanley. He said he'd look out for you."

"I should like to stay," protested Martin, turning his clear gaze upon her. "I'm just trying to find out something that will help Miss Hilda—and all of you. You said it would."

"Well, never mind." Jane could not help knowing that her voice sounded anxious, and she made a desperate effort to appear unconcerned. "It's my turn now to talk with Mr. Man——" a rosy color flooded her cheeks, and she broke off suddenly. "Oh, run along, Martin, do," she finished with an irritation which made Martin look at her in reproachful astonishment as he went away without another word.

"Now, I've hurt his feelings, I suppose, snapping at him that way," she said, as the boy went out of hearing. "He's the most sensitive kiddie, but he makes up with you beautifully." Jane was rattling on without much thought as to what she was saying, and quite determined to tell Martin's entire history if necessary in order to bridge over a trying situation. And then, all at once, she realized that the young man was not paying the slightest attention to her conversation, but was gazing at her with a perplexed and half-wistful expression. Something was coming, she knew, and the certainty of it made her heart beat faster.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Much as she liked being in the midst of things, she would have given a great deal to have her mother in her place at that moment.

Then, to her surprise, "I can't tell you my name," he said slowly, and quite as if she were the one who had been asking it. "I only wish I could, but—but I don't know what it is." He gripped the arms of the chair strongly, and Jane was startled by the sudden rush of color to his face. In spite of his evident distress, what he had said seemed to her an absurdity, and she concluded at once that his temperature was rising, that this was the beginning of being delirious, and that it was her part to agree with him and quiet him as much as possible.

"Oh, well, don't mind about telling us now," she said easily. "Some other day will do just as well. Couldn't I bring you a glass of milk, or—or—something?"

"Thank you—not anything. I can see you don't believe me, but I may as well tell the whole thing now I've started. I haven't the faintest idea who I am, nor how I came here, nor—nor which way to turn when I'm well enough to leave."

Jane gasped. The color had faded from the young man's face, and he looked pale and anxious, but there was something so compelling about his manner that she was forced to believe him.



## Martin's Man

"Do you mean you don't know about the accident, or that you were thrown out and brought into this house?" she asked wonderingly.

"That, yes, of course. Some one told me about that when I was well enough to begin to ask questions. But I can't remember who I am nor—nor why I was coming here. I hated to tell—because I thought it would—would all come back to me when I was better, but it doesn't—it doesn't." The perspiration stood on the young man's forehead in little drops, and he wet his dry lips nervously.

Jane was almost as much agitated as he was. "Why, I never heard of such a thing," she said, her gray eyes growing dark with excitement. "Now probably we shall never know why you had Aunt Caroline's name and Hilda's on a paper in your pocket. And how awful not to know your own name! I don't see——" and then she stopped precipitately, realizing all at once that this was no way to soothe a person already under a great strain.

"Oh, listen," she faltered, "I'm saying just the wrong things, but really it doesn't matter just now if you haven't a name. And you're sure to remember it, and all about yourself when you are a bit stronger. And mother—and Uncle Stephen—and Mr. Prescott will know what to do as soon



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

—as soon as they understand about this.” Jane was so obviously distressed that it became the young man’s turn to soothe her.

“Don’t mind, Miss Jane,” he begged. “I ought to have told some of the older people instead of putting my troubles on you. But somehow it came out after—after what Martin said. Perhaps you won’t mind telling them when you get the chance. It’s possible, you know, I may wake up to-morrow morning and know who I am and all about it.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will—very soon, anyway.” Jane was almost painfully eager to reassure him. “And I’ll tell the others, of course, but—but not Hilda just now, because she’s had a headache, and if hearing about it makes her feel the way it does me ——” She hesitated, conscious that she was saying the wrong thing again.

“Don’t tell her,” counseled the young man anxiously. “She’s been—they’ve all been so good to me that I wouldn’t have her troubled for anything.”

The sound of childish voices, and of Peter breaking into sudden weeping, brought a welcome relief to Jane. “Oh, excuse me,” she murmured, getting up hastily; “that’s Pansy teasing Peter, and I must go.”

She started toward the door, but turned and



## Martin's Man

with sudden impulse held out her hand to Martin's man. "Please don't worry," she said with great earnestness. "We're your friends, and it will all come out right, I'm sure." And then, in spite of the gravity of the situation, her refractory dimple appeared and she couldn't help smiling. "Do you know," she went on confidentially, "I've always wanted to solve a mystery, but when I try they're sure to disappoint me by coming out without any of my help. So you see—if I put my mind on this ——" with which helpful, but unfinished warning, Jane disappeared from the room.



## CHAPTER XII

### A SCYTHE FALLS

JANE'S news spread rapidly, and she congratulated herself on having for once made a veritable sensation, at least among the young people. Now that it was out, it was divulged that the doctor had some time before confided to the older members of the party his suspicion that his patient's unwillingness to talk about himself meant loss of memory.

"You might have knocked me over with a feather," Jane said that evening as they sat around the fireplace in the living-room toasting marshmallows. The coolness of the morning had changed to cold by night, and for almost the first time they were spending the evening indoors. "I thought of course he was delirious, and I was just going to run for Susan and ice-bags when something made me believe him."

"Do you suppose he'll ever remember who he is?" Judy asked in an awestruck tone.

"The doctor is almost sure of it," answered her mother. "He's been talking over the case with that specialist at the hotel, and they agree that it's



## A Scythe Falls

not at all unusual for a blow on the head to cause a temporary loss of memory. They think it may come back at any moment."

"I think," began Aunt Caroline, — "there, Donald, you've toasted that one just to suit me—I was going to say that it strikes me it's rather uncanny to have a person around who doesn't know who he is nor where he came from. Don't you all think it would be rather a good idea to have him taken back to Boston?"

"Pray, what should we do with him then?" Uncle Stephen got up and walked the floor in his excitement. "I wrote Herrick all we know about it"—Herrick was Uncle Stephen's private secretary—"and he's been searching the newspapers and watching for anything that may seem like a clue. I don't want to make it public enough to bring a bunch of reporters up here. If the poor fellow isn't himself by the time we leave, then we'll take him back to the city, and start a public campaign." Mr. Eliot turned a glance of mild reproof on his wife as he came back to his chair again. "My dear, if any one else should suggest setting him adrift, you'd put your foot down at once."

"And, Aunt Caroline, he is so nice," pleaded Jane, quite shocked by her aunt's apparent hard-heartedness.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"And very good-looking," murmured Carol, popping a fat marshmallow into her mouth as she said the last word.

"Oh, well, I was only trying to start a lively conversation," Aunt Caroline explained with a twinkle in her eye. "Really and truly I'm so interested in him that I wouldn't have him leave for anything. I can't help liking those pleasant brown eyes, and that wavy brown hair with the red lights in it. I think if you had any real consideration for him you'd give him a name."

That was turning the tables with a vengeance.

"Let's," said David, jumping up suddenly, and, to his great disgust, dropping a perfectly toasted marshmallow into the fire. "I'll get some slips of paper, and then each of us can write a name."

"Now, no funny business," he went on, as he distributed paper and pencils. "Each one of you write a name you'd be willing to be called by in case you lost your memory."

"Would Florence Nightingale do?" ventured Carol, stopping David in his progress, and looking at him with perfectly serious eyes.

"I said don't be funny," David retorted crushingly. "What would he want of a woman's name?"

"You said write what I'd like to be called if I lost my memory. What should I want of any-



## A Scythe Falls

thing but a woman's name? Aha! Mr. Spinksy Stuart. This time the joke's on you. You should learn to express yourself more clearly."

"Smarty! You knew what I meant. But that's one on me all right," grinned David cheerfully. "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Toast all the marshmallows I can eat for the rest of the evening. I'm tired of working for myself."

"Carol, there are times when I suspect you of being lazy," remarked Uncle Stephen.

"But when it's so easy to make some one work for you, how can you resist doing it?" Carol looked half-apologetic and half-mutinous. She had begun to fancy lately that Mr. Eliot didn't quite approve of her ways of evading what she considered unnecessary exertion.

"Now, Judy, I'll put them in this hat," said David, after they had all meditated and written, "and you draw out one. Stir them up well first."

And Judy, after stirring with a solemnity that made Jane want to laugh, drew out one of the slips. "An—An"—she was trying to make out the name by the light of the leaping flames—"oh, I know, Anthony Wayne."

"I thought it was going to be a lady when she began about 'Anne,'" murmured Carol, but Jane's voice interrupted her.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Is there any one that can't guess who put that name in?" she demanded. "Ever since Donald went to Valley Forge last summer, and saw that statue, he's been reading and talking about General Anthony Wayne."

"Well, I can't help it. He was a famous American soldier, and you'd feel just the way I do about that statue if you could see it. You can't help believing that if you turn your head for a moment he'll ride away. There he sits and ——"

"Why did I start you?" groaned Jane.

"Take this," said David, forcibly cramming a marshmallow into his mouth. "It was just your good luck to have Judy pull out that one. I wanted to name him Nathan Hale."

"I suppose I might be generous and give up my Anthony for your Nathan, but I shan't," Don said as soon as he could speak. "Unless Martin's man objects I shall name him for my hero. Besides, I thought," he added, putting on an air of modest pride, "that it was rather—well, rather economical to name him something that would fit the initials on his suit-case."

"Did you ever hear anything so clever as that?" demanded Jane, clasping her hands, and gazing at him with eyes so full of mock admiration that he almost choked over a marshmallow.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Rob, "our es-



## A Scythe Falls

teemed friend, Mr. Donald Lee, has shown so great and unexpected an intelligence that I move we adopt at once his choice of a name."

"Second the motion," murmured Stanley automatically.

And so it happened that a few days later, when the stranger was able to sit on the porch at Silver House, he was formally presented with his new name, and listened with great interest to all Donald told him of the man, and of his statue.

Jane, watching his face while Don was talking, saw curious changes of expression in his eyes. Once or twice she thought he was going to interrupt and say he knew all that Donald was telling, but the momentary gleam faded, and the anxious, questioning look, which was the usual one, came back.

Once on his feet again, the new Anthony Wayne improved rapidly, and, though he protested his willingness to leave at any time, stayed on with evident gratitude. Martin Joy was his constant companion, telling him the names of what they saw, showing him pictures, helping him to build up a new memory. For all of which the young man returned a growing devotion, and once in a while surprised them by showing a knowledge of something they didn't expect him to know.

In the meantime, Carol, having succeeded with-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

out much difficulty in convincing Miss Tinkle of the practical value of her ideas, had divulged her plans in regard to making over the two rooms, and was now occupied in cajoling every one else into doing the work for her.

Uncle Stephen, strolling over to the Tinkle house one afternoon while preparations were at their height, found the directress-in-chief, seated on the front steps in the shade, watching Rob, who was putting up a hammock near by. A little farther away David and Donald were working industriously to make the ground possible for croquet.

"Aren't they the busy little bees?" Carol demanded as she moved a little to make a place for the visitor. "Jane and Mr. Prescott are in the barn painting the bedsteads, and Molly and Miss Lily Tinkle are sewing like mad on the curtains. You know we're all invited to stay here to supper, and Miss Tinkle's getting it."

"Any one helping her?" There was nothing significant about Uncle Stephen's words or manner, but something made Carol look up at him quickly.

"Molly offered to, but Miss Tinkle said she'd rather do it alone," she answered hastily. "Of course—some of us—will help about the dishes."

"I hope so. Where are Sylvia and Stan? Have they slipped through your fingers?"



## A Scythe Falls

Carol frowned a little. "I haven't the slightest influence over Sylvia since she's found out she can sing. She's probably at Rivercroft trying over those songs she's had sent to her. Or she may be in the barn looking on. But Stanley's putting up fixtures for the curtains."

"Hm," said Uncle Stephen, and then was silent for some time. Carol was sure she could guess what he was thinking about, and she had almost made up her mind to slip into the house and escape what was coming, when he spoke again.

"You're resting, I suppose, after working hard up to this time?" he inquired so casually that for an instant she was deceived. But the moment he turned and looked at her with his twinkling smile, all her barriers of defense crumbled.

"You know I haven't been working," she answered sulkily. Then with a return of her gay audacity, "Father says that the people who know enough to direct without—without doing the work themselves—are the ones who succeed nowadays."

"Granted. I should be willing to wager, though, that he didn't mean that when you're with friends, and there's work to be done, you're to slide out of all the actual labor. Besides that, it takes real work to prepare one to direct efficiently."

Uncle Stephen rose and turned toward the back of the house. "I think I'll take a look at the out-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

posts; inspect the painting and curtain making," he said, gazing at the landscape with an appreciative eye. "Hello! There are Martin and Anthony Wayne coming across the fields. They seem to be bringing something."

Carol glanced at the two figures, and turned her head away indifferently. "Probably Miss Trot has been making cookies or tarts for Miss Tinkle's supper-party. Everybody works but Carol." She laughed as she said the last words, but for some reason it didn't sound very mirthful, and Uncle Stephen, who was starting away, turned suddenly and looked as if he were going back. Then he went on around the house with his mind full of conflicting thoughts.

"I'm an old bear to step in and preach to that little girl," he said to himself, giving one last glance at the quiet figure on the door-step before he took himself out of sight. "I suppose she's never had any one to tell her what a glorious thing work is, and that there isn't a spot on earth where a shirk is any good. I've half a mind to go back and soften things down a bit. It's a good deal, after all, to plan all this, and to know how it can be carried out so prettily." He stood still for an instant, then shook his head decidedly, and started toward the barn. Then a cheerful good-morning from Miss Tinkle, who was standing in



## A Scythe Falls

the back doorway, made him pause for a little conversation with her.

When Miss Tinkle had gone into the house again, and he had once more started for the barn, a voice from somewhere hailed him. "Oh, Mr. Eliot!" it said, and nothing more.

He gazed at all the down-stairs windows which came within his range, and was beginning to look a little puzzled when the voice quoted solemnly, "'Look up, not down.'"

"You rascal," he said in his kindest and most approving voice. "Did you fly there, and what are you up to now?"

"Sewing on the curtains, sir. Molly and Miss Lily have gone down-stairs," Carol answered in a meek little voice. "I'm the speediest thing you ever saw about making good resolutions. I'm always reforming myself, though perhaps you've never noticed it." She ended with a made-up sigh, as though she felt quite sure that even her best efforts were unappreciated, and sewed away with the air of one whose first thought was of duty.

Uncle Stephen smiled at the pensive, industrious maiden, too busy for the moment even to look at him, and lifted his hat in a salute which Carol caught with the corner of an eye. "Here's luck to your good resolutions. Some of us haven't



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

the grace even to make them," he said softly. "And it's a great deal to be so pleasant over it when a preachy old gentleman who hasn't any right takes it upon himself to ——"

"Oh, please don't say that. I—I liked it. I mean I like to have some one take an interest in me." Carol had dropped her work and scissors by this time and was absently poking her needle through the little holes in the screen. "I wish—I do wish you'd talk to me sometimes, Mr.—Mr. Uncle Stephen," she said haltingly. "When the boys come out after they've been with you they act as though they could conquer the world, and girls need it, too."

The wistful note in her voice made Uncle Stephen remember suddenly that the mother of this particular girl was not inspiring, and that her father was too much engrossed in business to inquire into his daughter's ideas.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about girls," he began hesitatingly.

"But you know enough to see through me. I *am* lazy, but I hate to have any one else think so. It was something like a game to see how much work I could get out of other people without doing much myself." Carol paused, and took a deep breath. Once started on confession she never spared herself. "And—and keep them liking me,



## A Scythe Falls

I mean. You think they do like me, don't you?" she ended a little anxiously.

"My dear, yes, of course. We're all fond of you." Uncle Stephen was quite touched, and felt that he never had liked her so well before. "Er—whenever you feel a special need of being told your faults, hunt me up, and I'll hit out from the shoulder just as though you were a boy. Is it a bargain?"

"I should say it was. I love to talk about myself, that is—I mean—well, perhaps, I mean just that," ended Carol in a burst of sincerity. "I shall probably work my fingers off for the next week, and then I shall need to be wound up again. And I think you're perfectly lovely to be willing to bother with me."

Uncle Stephen, going toward the barn again, felt that, after all, he hadn't made a mistake in giving Carol a hint as to her shortcomings. He decided that she had a great deal more to her than some persons gave her credit for, and that perhaps it was his mission to be a guide and inspirer to young people.

Inside the barn Jane, in a much-bedaubed blue apron, and Frederick Preston in overalls, were painting with an air truly professional.

"Come in and admire us, uncle," Jane called gaily. "We're just putting on the finishing



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

touches. By day after to-morrow the rooms will both be ready."

"And they're going to be lovely," added Sylvia, who was perched on a barrel where she could watch both artists. "One is a rosebud room, and the other paper has bunches of lilacs strewn over it. Oh, hello, Martin Joy, where did you come from?" she exclaimed suddenly. "How do you do, Mr. Wayne?"

"We came to bring something for the party," explained Martin. "Some—no, I guess I won't tell. It can be a s'prise. My Anthony and I know they're good, don't we?"

The young man nodded with his grave smile. There was always a look in his eyes that made Jane feel sorry. She was thinking about it now as she looked at him.

"I believe you sampled them on the way over," declared Rob, who with David and Don had come into the barn just in time to hear what Martin said.

Anthony Wayne smiled again, but the small boy's eyes grew big as he took up the defense.

"Uncle Stephen," said Jane softly, nipping Mr. Eliot's coat-sleeve with her two cleanest fingers, "come over this way. I want you to get a—a bird's-eye view of the bedsteads. Now, isn't that pretty neat?"



## A Scythe Falls

“My dear girl, you’ll have to suspend me from the rafters if I’m to have a bird’s-eye view,” objected Mr. Eliot. “They certainly are fine, though. But what can you expect when two such artists as you and Mr. Prescott get to work on anything like this?”

“Uncle, you’re making fun of me. Sometimes I think ——” And then, as she often did, Jane stopped in the midst of a really confidential remark, and talked about something else.

“Do you know, Uncle Stephen,” she went on, quite unmindful of the gay chatter at the other end of the barn where Stanley had just joined the group, “I’ve been thinking to-day that when Sylvia planned to bring Martin into the country it was just like dropping a pebble into clear water. Don’t you love to see the rings widen out? Sylvia made the first ripple, and now there’s another ring for these girls, and next summer Miss Tinkle means to have more. And Mrs. Batt wrote about Martin to a cousin of hers who lives near New York, and she has sent to the city for two children to stay with her through August and September. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could only watch the rings spread and spread?”

Jane’s expression grew visionary and tender as though she were seeing many little children cared for and made happy.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Jane, you're getting to be a real mother-girl," Uncle Stephen said suddenly, tilting her chin in order to look into the earnest gray eyes. "In spite of the difference in coloring there certainly is an expression like your mother. And you suggest her when you talk like that."

Jane's cheeks flushed under his close scrutiny, but her eyes looked happy. "Thanks for the compliment, uncle," she said simply, and then with a gay laugh, "it's lucky Judy isn't here. She wouldn't let me believe that if she could help it."

"What's that Stan has found?" queried Uncle Stephen, whose attention had just been drawn to the group at the other end of the barn. It looks like a set of old boxing-gloves."

"I found them up in the attic, sir," Stanley explained, when Mr. Eliot and Jane joined the others. "Miss Tinkle says they probably belonged to her aunt's son."

"Well, well, they look like the ones I used to box in. Put them on, some of you boys, and give us an exhibition. Let's see what Mr. Prescott has been teaching you this summer."

"All they do is to dance around and make dabs at each other," said Sylvia from her post of vantage on the barrel, watching Stanley and David handle the clumsy gloves. "It doesn't look as if you'd ever get anywhere that way."



## A Scythe Falls

"You ought to see us with our own gloves," said David, side-stepping to avoid an unexpected jab. "But you'd better try it if you think there's nothing doing."

"Don't talk, Spinksy. Save your breath." Jane was watching with great eagerness, and mentally comparing the combatants. David was pretty good at it, she decided, but in all honesty she had to confess that Stan was more alert and really the better boxer. And how happy and eager he looked.

"It strikes me you're both a little heavy on your feet," criticized Uncle Stephen as the boys stopped, and Rob and Don took the gloves. "I began to think some of these things hanging on the wall would come down."

"Yes, they certainly need to be lighter," announced Anthony Wayne so decidedly that every one felt surprised, but tried not to look so. "I've seen ——" and then he stopped short and flushed, and seemed to grope for the memory which eluded him. "I think they should be lighter," he said at last helplessly, and every one was glad to have Rob and Don begin to strike out experimentally.

If these two had received any scientific training from Mr. Prescott they made no effort to show it after the first few moments, and only did their best to be as funny as possible. Even the audience was



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

not safe, for the boxers forced each other from one part of the barn to another. Sylvia gave a little shriek when a sudden rush carried them almost against her barrel, but the next instant they were half-way across the barn again. Every one was laughing; the boys and Mr. Prescott and Uncle Stephen were shouting directions and warnings. A bunch of old sleigh-bells, hung insecurely on the side of the barn, added to the din by jangling to the floor.

Suddenly, through the confusion, Jane heard a stifled exclamation which forced her gaze in its direction to find Stanley, staring, with that face of frozen terror she had once before seen. Instantly her eyes followed his to see a scythe, hanging just over Sylvia's head, vibrate—slip on its sagging nail—catch—and slip again.

The next instant the scythe clattered to the top of the barrel and then to the floor, and Jane, hardly conscious of having moved, stood there holding on to her arm, and feeling rather queer and frightened.

“Why—why, Jane!” shuddered Sylvia, all the color gone from her face. “You swept me off as if I'd been a feather. Suppose I'd been on the barrel when that thing struck. Oh, your arm is hurt—it's bleeding.”

The shrill alarm of Sylvia's voice penetrated to





“OH—YOUR ARM IS HURT !”







## A Scythe Falls

every corner of the barn, and in a moment there was a group around Jane, who was gazing with startled eyes at a spreading stain on her sleeve just below the shoulder.

"I—I don't see how that happened," she said unsteadily. "I didn't feel much of anything—just the end of the blade must have caught me. I'm glad ——"

"Don't talk. Keep perfectly still," said Anthony Wayne, pushing through from behind the others, and taking command at once with an assured calm that bespoke experience. "Sit on the barrel, Miss Jane, and lean against your uncle. Now, let me see the poor arm."

Out from his pocket came a knife with which he slit the sleeves of apron and dress, and disclosed a gash from which the blood was oozing. "This isn't bad," he said with such certainty that every one looked relieved. "Some one get me some peroxide and adhesive plaster. Oh, probably they won't have adhesive plaster, but court-plaster will do."

He was gently pressing around the wound as he talked, and seemed to know exactly how to interpret the impressions his sensitive fingers received. "You may thank your lucky stars, Miss Jane, that you were wearing two sleeves and that the scythe was dull," he said at last.

"Ah, here you are," he went on, as David and



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Rob came hurrying back from the house, followed by the Tinkle Sisters and Molly. "Absorbent cotton, too. What sensible persons to have it on hand. I forgot to ask for scissors."

"I have them, and—and the court-plaster," said Miss Lily, much agitated, and pressing forward with a prettily decorated pink case which she offered to Anthony Wayne. "It—it was a Christmas present. I haven't cut into it."

"Lily, don't be childish," observed her sister severely.

Jane, leaning against Uncle Stephen's broad shoulder, felt perfect confidence in what this enterprising young man was doing, and watched him with interest while he cleansed the wound and stopped the flow of blood. Then with deft, accustomed fingers he put a piece of plaster on each side of the cut, parallel to it, and pressed the edges of the wound together, and held them so with narrow, overlapping strips of plaster.

All at once it seemed to her that with this return to something he had so evidently done many times before, his memory of all past things might come back to him. She waited eagerly to see him lift his eyes from her arm, hoping and half expecting that he would declare his name, and tell all about himself. But as so often happened, her rosy vision failed of reality.



## A Scythe Falls

"There, I believe that won't even leave a scar," he said at last. "Now come into the house, and lie down for a little, and get some of your color back."

"Am I pale?" Jane's hand went to her cheek instinctively. "Isn't it lucky it was my left arm? Now I can do almost everything just the same, and I do want to be in on the final arrangement of the rooms."

"Do you suppose Carol will let any one but herself do that?" inquired Uncle Stephen with mischief in his eye.

"Do we suppose? Just watch her," exploded Rob grimly. "Now, Lady Jane, sit in this chair, and your faithful slaves, meaning Davy and me, will bear you to the house."

"Oh, nonsense! I can walk perfectly well." Jane slid off the barrel as she spoke, and, to her own surprise, put out her hand and clutched at Rob's arm. "I do feel—just a little shaky," she confessed.

"You'd better ride. You may never get so good a chance," urged David.

Jane, enthroned, smiled at the faces clustered around her. "You all look a little pale, I think," she observed judiciously. "Perhaps it's the reflection from mine." And then, from among them, Stanley's face, white to the lips and hauntingly



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

wretched, came for a moment into prominence, and she felt instantly sorry for him, and wished with all her heart that he might have done this thing. "He doesn't know I saw him," she said to herself thankfully, and then with quick comprehension realized that it would take more than this to comfort him, and that it was his own opinion of himself he could not get away from.

It was while the triumphal procession was traversing the space between barn and house that Jane suddenly bethought herself of mother with the glad certainty that, if any one could help out just now, she could. Perhaps Stan would offer to go for her if she should suggest it. At any rate ——

"I wish some one would go over for mother," she said suddenly. "Of course there isn't anything the least bit the matter with me, but—but I always like to see mother."

"I'll get her. Please let me," begged Stanley, and was off before any one could stop him. Something in his heart responded to the desire in Jane's voice. He, too, more than anything else, wanted to see Jane's mother.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE PROPHETESS

WALKING across the fields in the clear light of the late afternoon, Stanley saw nothing of the beauty around him, but only a vision of the scythe, trembling above Sylvia's unconscious head, of its plunge downward, of Jane's quick leap. Until she moved he had not realized that any one was near except himself. He could not tell what chance had drawn his own eyes in that direction, since a moment before he, like all the rest, was looking at Donald and Rob. If Jane had not seen—he felt again the paralyzing grip of the fear which had held him motionless. His chance had come again and he had lost it.

“Probably it will never be any different,” he told himself forlornly. “I may think that I shall do the right thing, but when the time comes——” his sense of defeat stopped the filling out of the sentence. In the last few weeks he had tried so hard to believe that he would do the quick courageous act if need came, and now—after all, it was useless to think he could make himself over.

He was crossing a stone wall, and he stopped



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

half-way over, and sat there motionless, staring at the line of distant mountains, with the consciousness of baffled endeavor strong upon him. And, as he waited, all the bitterness of the early summer came back into his mind.

It was just as he had said to Mr. Chope, he was thinking. Some people were liked without half trying and others, though they tried, were never even half liked. "They're all mighty nice to me, but I can't help knowing that it wouldn't make any real difference whether I was here or not—except to Molly, of course."

As he thought of Molly he was glad she would never have to know this about him, and then, with a leap, his mind went back to the barn, the swinging scythe, his own helpless horror.

He got down from the wall and started along hastily. Anything would be better than to sit there and think. He was conscious again of the desire for Mrs. Stuart's friendly presence. Even the thought of her made his unhappiness seem a little less. It would be a comfort to have her say that he need not be discouraged, and that if another chance came she was sure—he could almost hear the inspiring voice, and see the light in her eyes—she was sure he would forget himself and know only the thing to be done.

Suddenly he stopped abruptly, and thrust both



## The Prophetess

hands into his pockets. "Hang it all! Why do I have to bother her as long as I know just what she'll say?" something within him surprisingly demanded; and with the thought came a hint of the fighting spirit, and the boy straightened unconsciously, and the color came back into his face.

"Now, look here, you can't always have Mrs. Stuart to run to when your feelings are bumped," he said to himself sternly. For the moment he had the queer feeling that deep down within him there was some one who didn't come to time, and needed to be scolded.

"There's just one thing she or any one else can say," he reflected, "that it's up to me to keep a stiff upper lip, and try again. 'Press the grit button.'" He smiled involuntarily as he remembered Mr. Chope's whimsical way of putting it.

"Well," he said with a deep breath, "I was going to tell her, but now I shan't. I'll pull out of this myself."

He was vaguely aware that the decision brought with it a freedom of spirit and an increase of courage that he had never felt before, and with it came the determination to try again to make a place for himself in the liking of these people. As he strode along his heart grew lighter, and he began unconsciously to imitate the note of a bird, flying in and out of the bushes beside the path.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Jiminy! I'd better be thinking how I can tell her without scaring her," he murmured, as he came within sight of the broad piazza, and saw Mrs. Stuart sitting there with a book.

Jane, meanwhile, was sitting in Miss Tinkle's living-room, feeling quite like herself again, and a little impatient over Anthony Wayne's decision that she should keep still until supper was ready. From where she sat in the midst of cushions on the sofa she could see Miss Lily Tinkle setting the table for supper, with Molly helping. Carol, who had come down-stairs to exclaim over the accident, had disappeared again on the plea of a little more work to do, and had taken Sylvia with her. Jane had no chance to feel really lonesome, however, for the three boys kept dropping in to talk to her.

"Do you know, Lady Jane," Rob said, sitting down beside the sofa, "I was quite positive that, after Anthony Wayne got through fixing your arm, he would stand up and say, 'I am John Smith,' or words to that effect."

"Why, so was I. It was a dreadful disappointment when nothing happened."

"I think if you'd been thoughtful enough to be hurt just a little worse you might have managed it. Did you notice how bright his eyes were, and how alive he seemed when he was fussing over you?"



## The Prophetess

"I should say I did. It quite hurt my feelings to see that other look come back—as if he were hunting for something and—and didn't have any hope of finding it."

"Golly! That's hard," said Rob, shaking his head. "I don't know what he would be if he had a memory, but I'm beginning to like him immensely even without one. There's something that—that draws you to him and"—he stopped and listened—"I can hear your mother's voice," he ended, getting up to make a place for Mrs. Stuart.

Jane put her well arm around her mother and hugged her, and as she did so caught a glimpse of Stanley, who looked a different boy from the one she had started toward Rivercroft. "I knew she could do it," she exulted inwardly, but, in spite of her confidence, she could not help wondering how mother had so surprisingly managed to put new courage into the boy's eyes.

"Mumsey, it isn't anything," she said in answer to her mother's anxious questions. "I ought not to have sent for you and scared you so."

"I tried to tell her so that she wouldn't be frightened." Stanley's voice was boyishly eager. "I—I thought I broke it to her very gently."

"You did. You were tactfulness itself," Mrs. Stuart said with a little laugh. "From your



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

manner I should have supposed that it was an every-day occurrence for a scythe to fall on some one. But I—I was just as much in a hurry to see Jane, nevertheless.”

“Anthony Wayne plastered it beautifully,” said Jane. “I’m quite proud of it. And, mumsey, it wouldn’t take a detective to tell that he is, or was, or is some time going to be a doctor.”

“Aunt Caroline would say, ‘Those agents do pick up so much knowledge,’” observed David, who was hovering around his mother and Jane. “Anyway, mother, it was great the way he took command. He certainly made it seem like the real thing.”

“Where is he now?” asked Mrs. Stuart.

“Oh, Hilda came over, and he and Martin walked back with her. We call them ‘Hilda’s lambs’ because they mind everything she says.”

“Uncle Stephen went home, too,” added David. “He’s going to send the machine over a little later for you and the girls.”

“I’d rather walk with the crowd,” Jane exclaimed disappointedly. “There’s nothing the matter with me.”

“Perhaps not, but Dr. Anthony Wayne said you were to keep that arm quiet for a while. And probably most of us can pile into the machine, anyway.”



## The Prophetess

"All right," said Jane resignedly, and then, with a burst of enthusiasm, "Um-um! I smell fresh cake or something just as good. I believe the party's almost ready." And, as if to prove her a true prophet, Miss Lily, all smiles, appeared in the doorway the next minute and announced supper.

"Have you ever seen a bun dance on the table?" murmured Rob, who had insisted upon escorting Jane to a seat with great ceremony.

"Yes, and I've seen a rope walk. Those jokes are old," she responded crushingly. "Doesn't everything look good? Oh, Rob, I hope I shan't be too enthusiastic about Miss Trot's tarts. I felt sure that was what Martin and Anthony Wayne were bringing. It wouldn't be polite, though, to admire what you have at home, would it?"

"Decide not to eat one and then you'll forget about them."

"False friend! You want my share. But—goodness me, what's this coming?"

A brilliant little figure, in a costume gay with color, flitted in from the hall as Jane spoke. "I'm a story-book gypsy," she announced, as she and Sylvia slipped into the vacant chairs. "Not one of the old, wrinkled, dirty ones that you always see, but a perfectly imaginary variety. Here, don't you touch my costume, David Stuart. It's only pinned."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Carol, you certainly are a genius," Jane said, peering around at her. "I shouldn't have believed any one could get up such a dandy costume out of a red table-cloth and a curtain and ——"

"Sh! Don't give away my secrets. I've been working so hard that I thought I'd just take a few minutes for real enjoyment, and Sylvia helped."

"Working!" exclaimed Donald.

"Yes, w-o-r-k-i-n-g," spelled Carol. "When there's so much to do I can't afford to frivol like the rest of you. I've finished the curtains—and put them up."

"Good gracious!" Rob almost tipped over his chair in order to look at her. "Do my ears deceive me?"

"For pity's sake, how did you manage to get them up?" demanded Molly.

"Oh, I dragged in the step-ladder that Stan didn't put away."

"I left it there until to-morrow, of course," protested Stanley. "I told you I'd put up the curtains for you."

"I know it, but when I once get started something makes me work my fingers to the bone. Look at them"—Carol held up two hands absurdly small and white—"see what bones they are. But when one loves work the way I do, she simply can't rest."



## The Prophetess

"Well, turn your attention to this supper for a while, and you'll feel refreshed after your labors," advised Mrs. Stuart with a laugh.

"And also give some one else a chance to talk, do you mean, little Mother Stuart? Yes'm, I will," answered Carol with a demure meekness which did not accord with her fantastic costume.

"Is there any other kind of a sandwich?" David inquired anxiously. "I've had four different ones, and they're all so good I can't tell which I like best."

Miss Lily Tinkle beamed upon him. "Did you have one made of chicken, with nuts and sweet peppers and salad dressing?"

"I—I think that was number two," David answered with a dreamy look in his eyes. "If some one should urge me to take another—I might be able to make up my mind about them."

"Don't eat so many sandwiches that you can't try one of these cream puffs," advised Molly. "Miss Tinkle, if you and Miss Lily are going to cook like this for those girls who are coming you'll send them back plump and rosy."

"That's exactly what we hope to do," Miss Tinkle responded with enthusiasm. "And we are so much obliged to you all for giving us the idea, and helping us to carry it out. Those rooms that Miss Carol has planned are ——"



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Just wait until you see them finished," Carol interrupted eagerly. "One day more will do it. How early may I come over to-morrow morning, Miss Tinkle?"

"Did you ever hear the like of that?" murmured Jane. "I've had all I could do this summer to get her out of bed before eight o'clock."

"Well, never you mind, I've reformed."

"For how long, Carol?" inquired Rob interestedly.

"For as long—for as long as it lasts, Mr. Robert Randall." Carol made up a little face at Rob as she answered. He never seemed to believe in her reformations, she was thinking.

"If you were only a real gypsy, Carol, instead of a story-book one, you could read our palms," said Jane, as they were getting up from the table.

"Why, I can, anyway. I know something about the lines—and what I don't know I can make up," she ended in a lower tone.

"That's what they all do, I suppose," laughed Jane. "You can begin with me, because they won't let me help about clearing the table. You don't know anything about my character, of course."

"You're fairly good-natured and very kind-hearted," began Carol, with a twinkle, studying Jane's hand, which beside her own looked brown



## The Prophetess

and serviceable. "Hm—rather fond of athletics, I should say. And you tell the truth even when—when people would rather hear something else. Just—a little bit—preachy, perhaps, but ——"

"You sinner! To twit me of that when I've been hurt. And—and it just missed being a great deal worse." Jane knew how easily she could work on her friend's feelings.

"Oh, darling, I'm a wretch. Does it hurt you much? Anyway, there's loads of character in this hand if I could only read it. You needn't laugh. Mother and I had a book on palmistry once, and we looked at all the hands we could get hold of, and really knew quite a lot about it."

But Jane did laugh, and pulled away her hand. "You've spoiled my confidence," she insisted. "Here comes Rob. Let's make him try his fate."

Rob, forced into it by Jane's entreaties, sat down and presented his palm to the gypsy, who studied it gravely. "Do you mind going away?" she said looking up at Jane. "It distracts my attention to have any one here but the—the patient."

"Oh, that's mean—but I'll go." Jane departed, and Carol resumed her close scrutiny of the well-shaped hand intrusted to her. It occurred to her that now there was a chance to get back at Rob for some of the things he had said to her.

"You're rather hasty in judging people," she



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

said slowly, "and often you don't give them the credit they deserve. You don't make any excuses for them if they aren't up to your ideas."

"Don't mind me," murmured Rob; "say any old thing you please."

"You're pretty fond of your own opinion, and rather bossy, and you think R. Randall is about as nice as they make 'em," Carol hurried on, a little irritated by Rob's smiling good-nature. And then, because she didn't want to be too mean, she added, "You're not fond of many people, but you're a dandy friend to the ones you like best."

"You have to put in something respectable once in a while, don't you?" teased Rob. "You'd better be good to me, or I shan't invite you to any college teas next winter."

"Who cares? It's spiteful of you to say that; and it shows you're selfish to be willing to deprive me of so much fun. Now, listen; I'm a prophetess, and I prophesy that you're not going to college this year."

Why Carol ended with this she never knew. But it was the most unpleasant thing she could think of on the spur of the moment, and as she was only doing it for a joke, she thought it did not matter what she said.

Rob laughed. "I'm glad you're not the real thing in prophetesses." He was getting up from



## The Prophetess

his chair as if he had had enough of such foolishness. "I guess I'm as sure of college next fall as one can be of anything. I'd be awfully disappointed if I couldn't go, so don't hoodoo me. Let's shake hands to show there's no hard feeling."

He looked so friendly that Carol repented at once. "Of course I didn't really mean any of the horrid things I said," she confessed impulsively, "but I was trying to get back at you, because you never seem to believe in me when I'm reforming."

"Don't I?" He stared at her thoughtfully, as though the idea were quite new to him. "Do you want me to tell you what I do think?" he asked suddenly. "Well, then, I think that in the last year you've improved more than any girl I know," and then he marched off before Carol could answer.

"Now, wasn't that nice of him?" she said to herself as she watched Rob march across the room without a backward glance. "It sounded as if he meant it, too, but of course there's no telling how disagreeable he thought I was a year ago."

And then David's hand was thrust at her, and after his another, and she told them all the foolish, funny things she could, with sly bits of truth stuck in here and there. At last some one pushed Stanley into the game, and Carol, who felt she owed him something for the critical things she



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

had said in the past, turned serious and sent the others away, and said all the nice things she could think of.

"Oh, fudge, you're kidding me," he said after a few moments, turning very red and pulling his hand away.

"Well, perhaps, a little, but do you know what I really think, Stan? I can truthfully say that in the last three weeks you've improved more than any boy I know," and, without waiting to see the effect of her remark, Carol resigned her position as palmist, and went across the room to see Uncle Stephen, who had unexpectedly come back.

"I've come with the machine, Elizabeth," he said to Mrs. Stuart, "and I held up the doctor, and made him turn in here to take a look at Jane's arm. The way that young man plastered it seemed all right, but I wanted to be sure."

"That's as good a piece of work as you'd want to see," the doctor assured them as he surveyed the pink mound with eyes and fingers. "Firm as need be, and very prettily done. It may be you won't even have a scar, Miss Jane."

"That's what Dr. Anthony Wayne said," Jane responded demurely.

"Who—what——? Oh, yes, I remember. Well, you couldn't have given him a name that would suit me better. Anthony Wayne is one of



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my heroes," and with a wave of the hand, the busy doctor was out of the room and out of the house.

"Don't lose a chance there to talk about Valley Forge," observed Uncle Stephen to David's great delight. "I hate to break up this party, but it looks as though there would be a thunder-shower, and I think we ought to be going."

"I'll round up the others," offered Stanley. "A few minutes ago Miss Lily was telling Sylvia's fortune in a teacup, and promising her all sorts of glory as a singer, so I don't know whether I can persuade her to break away."

"What kind of a fortune did she give you, my boy?" demanded Uncle Stephen, tweaking a lock of Stan's thick, dark hair.

"I didn't have one, sir," answered the boy, flushing a little with pleasure. Even to have Mr. Eliot pull his hair seemed to imply a certain comradeship. "I—I'm awfully busy trying to figure out how to make my own moves," he added impulsively, gazing with sudden appeal into the kind eyes that met his own with such friendly response.

"Good for you. You're trying to play the game squarely, eh? That's what we all need to do, isn't it?" Uncle Stephen's hand came down with a firm grip on the boy's shoulder as they walked across the room together.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

When they reached home, just before the first drops of rain fell, Aunt Caroline met them in the front hall with a bunch of letters.

“Miss Carol Heath—Robert Randall—Miss Jane Stuart—Mrs. Stuart—here, Don, you take them, and deliver the rest. I believe no one is left out this time.”

Jane, smiling over a funny letter from Polly Reed, looked up just in time to see Rob fold his letter suddenly and stuff it into his pocket. His face, ordinarily so cheerful, looked anxious and rather pale. At least she fancied so, but the next moment he moved a little out of the light and spoke to some one, and she decided that it was only her imagination which had made him seem different from usual.

The thunder-shower, which, by its violence, made them all glad they were safely under shelter, died away at last, leaving a gentle, persistent rain in its wake, and by bedtime it seemed quite certain that a rainy to-morrow would follow.

Just as she was about to get into bed, Jane, moved by sudden impulse, slipped across the hall and into her mother's room, where Judy was already peacefully asleep.

“It's just for a minute, mumsey,” she said in a low voice, cuddling into bed beside her mother. “I know it seems awfully inquisitive, but I'm just



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wild to know what you said to Stan this afternoon that made him feel so much better. I thought he was going to have an awful time with himself, but when he came back with you, he looked so changed I could hardly believe my eyes."

"Why, Jane, I don't know what you mean." Mother's voice was so full of surprise that Jane stared vainly through the darkness at her. "I can't remember exactly what I did say to Stanley. I thought he seemed unusually cheerful, and we chatted, and then, just before we got to Miss Tinkle's, he told me about you and Sylvia. What did you think I might have said?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Jane, suddenly thrown into the midst of perplexities. "He didn't tell—he didn't tell you anything about himself then?"

"No-o," answered mother slowly, as if she were trying to remember. "Nothing that I can recall. Did you expect him to confide in me, darling?"

Jane poked her feet out of bed and landed softly on the floor. "Do you mind if I don't answer that, mumsey?" she whispered. "It isn't anything that I really need to tell you—and I'd rather not."

"That's all right, Janey." Mother's voice and manner were absolutely trustful. "Don't stay out of bed too long, dear. The air is pretty damp and chilly."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Jane made a quick guess at the situation of mother's mouth and dropped a kiss there. "Good-night; pleasant dreams," she said softly, and was gone.

"Now, what made him feel so much better?" she asked herself as she snuggled into her own bed. And then a sudden thought crept hatefully into her mind and took root there. He didn't realize that any one knew he saw. Could that make so great a difference, she wondered. She had supposed he cared because he thought he was a coward, and not merely because some one else knew of it.

"Well, I can't straighten it out," she said to herself with a little sigh, closing her eyes and beginning to feel sleepy. "Anyway, if that is the reason"—she stared into the darkness with a puzzled frown—"well, I shan't like him for it if it is. And I really was beginning to like him. I don't see how I'm ever going to know, though." And with this burden of perplexity on her mind Jane fell asleep.

In spite of it, her slumber was so sound that she failed to hear the opening and shutting of doors in the middle of the night, or the murmur of voices, and slept on until her own name and a gentle touch on her shoulder woke her. Mother was standing there with a candle in her hand, and she spoke softly so that she should not disturb Carol.



## The Prophetess

"Jane, dear, a telegram has come for Rob, and he will have to leave on this early morning train. David thinks Rob would like it if you got up to say good-bye to him."

Jane slipped out of bed and began to dress with her eyes half shut. She was instantly conscious of the chill grayness of the early morning, and of the steady downpour of rain.

"Wh-what has happened?" she whispered.

"Mr. Randall is very ill. Rob had a letter from his mother last night, and made up his mind at once to start to-day. And now this telegram ——" Mrs. Stuart broke off suddenly. "I must go and see if there is anything I can do to help. Come down as soon as you can."

In the dining-room ten minutes later, Jane found Rob and David and Stanley eating a hurried breakfast, while Uncle Stephen hovered around trying to keep up a conversation, and only making the dismal pauses seem more prominent.

"You here?" Rob put out his hand involuntarily, and looked up at Jane with an attempt at a smile that made her grip his hand hard and swallow before she could speak.

It was so like a strange dream to be shaking hands with Rob in the chill grayness of the early morning, with sober faces all around her.

"Yes, I'm here," was all she could manage to



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answer, and then she got what comfort she could by turning on the electric toaster, and making a slice of toast, thin and brown and crisp, just as she knew Rob liked it.

"Come into the living-room for a moment as soon as you've finished your breakfast, Rob," Uncle Stephen said. "You've got twenty minutes yet before you need to start, and I want to have a little talk with you."

"Stan and I are going to the train with him," David said when Rob had left the dining-room. "Come on up-stairs, Stan, and see if Don has finished the trunk."

Mrs. Stuart sat down on the window-seat beside Jane. "Uncle Stephen told me several weeks ago that there has been trouble with Mr. Randall's business for some time," she said softly. "He thinks Rob didn't know about it, and I'm afraid the poor boy will have a great deal to face."

"Oh, mother ——" began Jane, but just then the cook came to ask Mrs. Stuart to go into the kitchen for a moment, and Jane was left alone.

If there were only something she could do, she thought anxiously. Friends were so helpless! Poor Rob would have to march up to his troubles all alone without even a brother or sister to share the hard times. And then, at the thought of marching against trouble, she suddenly remem-



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bered the quotation Rob had coaxed her into repeating to him. She had promised to write it for him and had never done so.

Uncle Stephen's den was even darker and more airless than the other rooms, but Jane switched on the electric light, seized paper and pen, and went to work.

She must put the best and clearest work into this, for it was useless to give him something he could not read. Instinctively she began half-printing it in small, even letters, as she would have put a verse on a calendar.

"There! He'll never recognize my writing, but he'll remember the quotation and where it comes from," she said as she ended it. "Now I'll slip it into his pocket."

Rob and Uncle Stephen were still in the living-room. Jane caught a glimpse of them, as she passed the door, standing before a crackling fire, Rob with arm against the mantel, and his anxious, boyish face illumined by the blaze. She drew a quick breath as she went on.

In the hall was Rob's suit-case and on the hall-seat were two raincoats. Jane pushed David's aside, and tucked the folded paper into one of the deep pockets of the other. Then she stood at the front door and looked out at the swaying branches, and the rain, which was lessening now.



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Very soon the automobile appeared and Jane opened the door for the chauffeur, who ran upstairs. A moment later he and David came down carrying Rob's trunk. Stanley seized the suit-case and raincoats, and followed the others to the machine. When Rob came out of the living-room he looked so pale and sober that Jane could only mumble something, she hardly knew what, as he gave her hand a quick grasp and hurried off.

Before the boys got into the automobile they paused for an instant. David and Stan put on their raincoats, and Rob opened his suit-case and extracted therefrom a coat which looked exactly like the one Stanley was putting on. Don, who had gone out with them, shoved Rob into it, and then shut the suit-case with a snap and handed it to the chauffeur.

"Oh," said Jane with a gasp, and took three steps across the piazza just as the automobile rolled smoothly away.

"Mustn't stop them now, Janey," cautioned Uncle Stephen kindly. "They haven't much time to spare."

A moment later, alone with her mother in the living-room, Jane disclosed the mistake she had made. "I wanted Rob to have it, and I took such pains with it," she lamented. "You know I can print pretty well. And I never thought of any



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one but Rob and David when I saw those two coats. Well, there's one comfort ; Stan will never know who did it."

"We shall all be writing to Rob later ; you can put it in then, Janey," suggested mother. "And perhaps it will do some good where it is now."

"I shall never feel so much like it again," sighed Jane. "And it won't do any good where it is now. I've lost my faith in that direction."

For an instant she stared soberly into the fire, which had lost its life and glow, and was dying down. Then, with a little shiver, she said, "I'm going back to bed, mumsey," and was off directly, leaving Mrs. Stuart to wonder by what ill fortune poor Stanley had fallen out of her daughter's good graces again.



## CHAPTER XIV

### PORCUPINES AND FISH

EVERY one grieved for Rob when word came that he had reached home too late to say good-bye to the father who had been his dearest comrade. And they all missed him so much that, during the first week after his departure, Rivercroft housed a forlorn and spiritless group of young people.

This being the case, Uncle Stephen brought to immediate completion some plans he had been secretly making, and announced that a personally conducted party would leave for Porcupine Lodge on August eighth.

“Hurrah! That’s day after to-morrow,” said David. “Are you going to let the girls go, uncle?”

“Why, you young villain! You back number! Don’t you know that the girls are included in everything nowadays?” Uncle Stephen grew quite red in the face in his effort to be severe. “I—why, I’d sooner think of leaving you boys behind.”

“Now will you be good?” said Jane with more



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animation than she had shown for a week. "Please tell us about it, uncle."

Mr. Eliot adjusted his glasses and took an envelope from his pocket. "We're going into the woods near those mountains you can see from here. This picture shows you the lodge with all the little cabins clustered around it, and the lake not far away. A friend of mine had it last year, and it's just a surprising chance that it wasn't let early in the season."

"I choose this cabin," said Carol, indicating the one nearest the lodge; "then it will be easier for me to get up for breakfast."

"There'll be no chance for lie-abed persons there," Uncle Stephen announced. "We'll ship them right back to Rivercroft to their Aunt Caroline."

"Isn't Aunt Caroline going with us?" demanded Jane.

"She prefers to stay here and invite some friends. And your mother insists that Hilda shall be in the party, and she and Judy will go to Silver House and stay until we get back. Ken and Mr. Prescott, and Anthony Wayne and Martin are going with us."

"Good!" said Jane. "Now Martin can see the realest woods. But—mother!"

"I know," answered Uncle Stephen. "I let her



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plan it herself, though, and she seems to think this way is best. Perhaps you can make her alter her mind."

But though Jane and all the others did their prettiest coaxing, Mrs. Stuart was firm, and could not be persuaded to change her plans.

There was a train ride and then a long wagon ride, and it was just at sunset when the party drove up the last winding hill from the top of which Porcupine Lodge looked out on the placid lake with its wooded islands. The distant, hazy mountains Jane had so often gazed upon loomed near and distinct, and behind them the sun had just dropped out of sight, leaving a crimson flush on the lake, and a wealth of color in the sky.

A plump woman in a dark-blue dress and white apron came out to greet them as they stopped in front of the lodge, and the talkative man who had driven the first wagon introduced her to Uncle Stephen as "My wife, Mis' Dodd."

"Supper'll be ready as soon as you're ready for it," she said smilingly, and every one blessed her for the words. "There's a chance to wash your hands right in the lodge here, and after supper you can decide where you'll sleep."

The lodge had four rooms, a big living-room with a small bedroom off from it, a large dining-room and a kitchen. At one end of the living-



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room there was a huge fireplace in which a fire was already blazing, for the mountain air was cool. There were quaint benches, a number of wicker chairs, a slippery-looking couch, and to the joy of every one, a phonograph. Jane tried to photograph the room on her mind while she waited, because she wanted to write mother every small detail.

They were all so tired that supper and the choosing of cabins were matters to be put through as quickly as possible. After which with thankful hearts they went to bed.

"Lady Jane," Carol said softly, feeling disappointingly wakeful after she had snuggled into her cot, with her friend just across the cabin from her. "Lady Jane, are you afraid?"

"No. Not with so many people within screaming distance," mumbled Jane, who had been almost asleep, and rather resented having to speak again.

"I—I'm going to try to be an awfully good sport, Jane," murmured Carol a few minutes later. "I'm not going to scream and be foolish, and I'll wear those thick shoes, and ——" Something told her that her remarks were unheard, and she stopped abruptly. "Dear me, I wish we could both feel talky at the same minute," she said to herself impatiently. "I'm not a bit sleepy now."

She lay there quietly for some time wanting to



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get up, and look out of the door at the lake and mountains, but hating to leave the safe shelter of her bed. Suddenly she wondered why it was called "Porcupine Lodge," and an obvious reason flashed into her mind.

"I suppose there are millions of porcupines around here," she said to herself, involuntarily curling up her feet and pulling the bedclothes more tightly around her. "Ugh! Horrid things that shoot quills!" She remembered with terror a friend of hers, who, camping out, had written that the porcupines nibbled her toes while she slept.

"Oh, dear, I never shall go to sleep," she moaned softly. "But I will not wake Jane." It was much easier being a real sport in one's imagination, but she would not give up the idea, she decided pluckily. The next instant she was smothering a scream with her head under the blankets, because something rustled in the corner of the cabin.

It was perfectly heartless of Jane to sleep like that, she told herself, when she finally dared to emerge from under the bedclothes again. There were all sorts of little noises which no one would like to hear all alone. Then, with a quick change, she thought of Miss Tinkle and Miss Lily, who would sympathize with her nervousness, she was sure. And from them, her mind turned to the



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pale girl who had settled down in Miss Tinkle's rosebud chamber with such deep rapture in her dark, tired eyes.

In spite of her fears Carol sighed contentedly, and began to relax a little. She was thinking of the girl's face when she said that she had read a great deal about the palaces of the rich, but nothing had ever seemed to her quite so beautiful as that room.

"It's—very—satisfactory—to do things—for people—when—when they're so—grateful," Carol murmured jerkily. Then with no consciousness that a moment of time had passed, she suddenly found herself sitting up in bed, screaming, with her eyes tightly shut. As she woke more fully, she screamed still louder, and it was not until Jane had taken both of her hands and was soothing and scolding at the same time, that she consented to open her eyes and shut her mouth.

"It—it was a porcupine," she whimpered. "He—he tried to cuddle down on my shoulder." She had released one of her hands, and was rubbing her cheek in a dazed fashion, and still sniffing pathetically. "He shot his qu-quills at me—I felt it."

"You'd be likely to if one had," Jane said drily. "I never heard of a porcupine trying to cuddle on any one's shoulder, and there isn't any hole in



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your cheek, nor a quill sticking out. You were dreaming, girl."

"Dreaming!" retorted Carol with an indignation that dispelled her fright. "Dreaming! Why, I haven't closed ——" she paused, suddenly conscious of unmistakable daylight, and of the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Tell 'em it was you screaming—ple-ase," she implored, just as David's voice demanded what had happened.

"We're all right," Jane answered. "It was only a bad dream. Spinksy, are you up for keeps? I'll be out in a minute."

The girls, listening, could hear David turn away explaining to several interested persons that one of the girls had had the nightmare.

"Jane, you're a brick. Now they can only tease me half the time. I'm going to get up, too, even though—even though I haven't been asleep." Carol giggled softly, and in spite of her heroic resolve, lay perfectly still looking around the cabin.

All at once Jane heard a stifled exclamation, and turned to find her friend pointing at something, and shaking with laughter.

"S-see the porcupine," she gasped faintly. "I t-told you there was one."

Jane's eyes followed the direction of the point-



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ing finger to see a plump, striped chipmunk, sitting on the little ledge above the door, gazing at them with an air of offended dignity.

“Oh, you darling,” she cried softly. “Wait till I get you one of those little crackers mother put in my bag.”

“Mercy! He won’t come near you. They’re the scarest things.”

“Except in the night, when they want to cuddle on your shoulder, and stick porcupine quills into you,” retorted Jane. And then, holding out the cracker and coaxing in her most beguiling tones, she was almost as startled as Carol when the little creature apparently hurled itself through the air, and came in a swift scramble from the floor to her shoulder. Here it nibbled the cracker with great enjoyment, while Jane held her breath and did not dare to move.

“Oh, if Martin and Ken could only see this,” she breathed. “Some one must have tamed him.” She put up her hand to touch him, and in a flash he was regarding them from the safe shelter of the top of the window, and saying in his own language something of evidently great importance. Five minutes later he had disappeared off the face of the earth, so far as they could tell, and neither of them had seen his departure.

Jane, leaving Carol to dress at her leisure, walked



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out of the cabin to find Martin feeding birds under the guidance of Mrs. Dodd. Near at hand a striped chipmunk lurked, and darted out now and then to snatch a crumb or two.

"Mr. Nibbles don't seem to feel so very hungry this morning," Mrs. Dodd said, looking at Jane with her pleasant smile. "He's a little mite afraid of the birds, though, and perhaps that's the reason."

"Unless I'm mistaken he's had something to eat," laughed Jane. "What do you think, Martin, he came into our cabin and woke us."

"So that was the cause of the screams." Mrs. Dodd looked a little worried. "I forgot he might keep on going in there. You see, I've had a little niece living with me for some time and she tamed him, and she slept in that cabin. We've never been able to find where he goes in and out, or else we'd have it stopped."

"Oh, please don't," cried Jane, and then laughed at Martin's quivering eagerness when Mr. Nibbles, grown a little bolder, raced to his shoulder, and then to his pocket.

"Well, there, I guess you'll be wanting some breakfast. I'd like to stay out here all the morning, and show the sights to that little boy," and Mrs. Dodd started toward the house with a regretful glance at Martin.



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Then from just behind Jane came a melodious voice quoting —

“Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,  
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,  
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.”

“Isn’t that lovely?” Jane said with a deep breath. “It’s—why, it’s wonderful. Please say it again slowly, Mr. Prescott. It just expresses my feelings.”

“It’s remarkable, isn’t it, how often the immortal Shakespeare helps us to express our feelings? I’ll say it again, and you can learn it for future use.”

“Now I’m all ready for the next ‘glorious morning,’” Jane exulted when she had tucked the lovely lines into a safe corner of her mind. “I must teach that to Spinksy. He and mother are the other members of my poetry club.” And then it flashed into her mind that some one else had wanted to belong, and she found herself thinking how Rob would have enjoyed this morning, and the mountains, and Carol’s adventure with the chipmunk.

It was somewhat startling, therefore, to have David say almost in her ear, “Isn’t it a burning shame that all this couldn’t have happened before old Rob had to go away?”

“I should say so. I was just thinking of him.



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You haven't had a chance to tell me what was in that letter you had yesterday."

"Not much. He was glad to get all our letters, and he says he's got to hunt a job." In spite of the sunshine and joy and life about him, David's youthful face was set in very sober lines.

"Oh, Spinksy, does that mean no college?"

"I suppose so. Poor old Rob! Everything's hitting him at once. I feel as if I ought to be back in Belhaven. Anyway, when we do get there we'll 'stand by,' won't we, Janey?"

"Of course we will." Jane's face brightened a little, and at that moment there was a joyous burst of laughter which drew her attention to the group Mr. Nibbles was entertaining.

"He's a dear, isn't he, Ken?" Carol said as they all started toward the house in response to a welcome summons. "That is, I think so when I know that he isn't a——" She stopped short and looked at Jane with a conscious smile. "Did you ever know such a grand morning?" she went on hurriedly. "It makes me feel that I want to do all sorts of outdoor things."

"Like lying on the grass, or in hammocks, do you mean?" suggested Donald meanly.

"Now, you've hurt my feelings." Carol tried to look sad and failed utterly. "I mean something strenuous like rowing, and—and fishing."



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"There's nothing very strenuous about the fishing you'll do," remarked Stanley. "Why don't you have a string and a bent pin, and sit on the shore of the lake?"

"Don't discourage her, my boy," Uncle Stephen admonished. "Every girl has a right to think she's going to reform. I should like to see you and Sylvia cultivating the athletic spirit, my dear, and there's no time like the present. Just show those scoffing boys that merely lack of inclination has kept you from it before."

They were taking their seats at the table as Mr. Eliot finished speaking, and Carol slipped into the chair beside him, feeling that at least she had one friend who would sympathize with her sudden ideas of reformation.

For the greater part of the morning, every one was busy getting settled, and investigating the immediate neighborhood of Porcupine Lodge.

Jane, dashing around the house in pursuit of Don and David, came upon Sylvia and Carol, who were sitting on the piazza.

"We're three miles from our next neighbor," she announced, slackening her rapid pace slightly. "And we raise all our own vegetables and milk and eggs, and the mail is brought by a boy once in two days.

"We're going fishing this afternoon," she flung



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back at them when she was almost out of hearing. "Don't get too tired—sitting still."

"Oh, the mean little thing, to get too far off for us to say anything back," lamented Carol. "Honestly, Sylvia, I more than half meant what I said this morning about trying to be athletic. We lose lots of fun because we don't do the outdoor things."

"I suppose so," Sylvia assented cheerfully. "I don't see how I can help it, though, for I don't know how, and I'm not that kind, anyway."

"Well, neither am I, but to-day I seem to see a glorious career in athletics before me."

"It certainly isn't behind you," interpolated Sylvia unkindly.

"That remark is beneath my notice. I shall be forgiving enough to drag you on to glory with me. Can you row?"

"Never tried it."

"Well, I have, and I heard Mr. Prescott tell Ken that that small rowboat tied to the float is perfectly safe, and we'll keep along by the shore where the water isn't deep."

"What does all this mean?" Sylvia was plainly mystified.

"Why, I'm proving to you that you're quite safe in accepting my invitation to go rowing. Come on, Sylvy, please. We'll surprise them all."

"I shouldn't wonder if we did," murmured



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Sylvia, getting up in response to Carol's tugging hand, and following her to the float without the slightest intention of leaving firm ground.

"I'll untie it. Now I'll get in and steady it. Now, step right here ——" Carol's imperative tone had the desired effect, and much to her own surprise Sylvia found herself sitting on one of the small seats, gazing anxiously at the lake, which seemed all at once very large and billowy. Carol, facing her, seemed by contrast proportionately small and fragile.

"You never can use those two oars," she gasped, with a sinking feeling at her heart, when her friend pushed the boat away from the float. "You'd better let me try one. I—I think I know something about the stroke. You're—doing—beautifully, of course."

"Y-yes. It's easy." At that instant one of the oars got caught, and Carol nearly went over backward in her effort to extricate it. They were about two boat-lengths from the shore, and parallel with it, and she felt that she could afford to rest a moment, and decide which way to go.

"If you don't let me take one of those oars I'll step out and wade ashore," Sylvia said firmly. "I can see exactly how you do it, and I'm not going to let a little thing like you do all the work."

"Well," agreed Carol, who knew her friend's



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mild obstinacy, "take one then. Perhaps it will be better."

They were so absorbed that neither had noticed that there was an observer of their efforts in the person of Stanley, who, as the oar was transferred from one to the other, watched them with some perplexity.

"We—we don't seem to get anywhere," panted Carol a few moments later.

"Am I doing it right? I'm trying to stroke—to pull—whatever you may call it—just the way you do."

"I guess so." Carol's voice was distinctly weary. "Let's rest again, and then perhaps we'll get on better."

Carol's gaze wandered from the lake to the shore, and there encountered Stanley doubled up with silent mirth. "Now, what is the matter with you?" she demanded impatiently. "I don't see anything funny."

"Try sitting with your back to Sylvia," was all Stanley could hurry out before he went into another paroxysm.

Carol stared blankly into Sylvia's face. "Mercy me! We've been pulling in different directions," she faltered, and then the funny side of it struck her, and she laughed until Sylvia begged her to stop.



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"Stan, what will you take not to tell the others about this?" she demanded.

"Just one little promise from you and Sylvia. Now get the boat back here and take me in. If you're going to do things like this you must learn how."

There was an authority about Stan not to be questioned, and Carol meekly prodded and wriggled the boat within reach of the float.

"Now," said Stanley, holding the boat steady. "You move up into the end, Sylvia, and I'll show Carol how to use the oars."

Stanley was a good teacher, and before long Carol began to feel that she really could accomplish something if she persevered. Color came into her cheeks, and there was a sparkle of determination in her eyes.

"Just a little more?" she pleaded, when Stanley took the oars and turned toward the float.

"Not another stroke. You've had enough for one lesson. I'll give you another any time you like, but you and Sylvia have got to promise not to get into a boat without some one who knows about it."

"I promise," answered Sylvia with great readiness. "And what's more, I'm not going to try to be athletic. I may as well give up first as last."



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"Oh, Sylvia, don't. I'm not going to stop trying, but I promise about the boat, Stan. And you've been so perfectly fine about teaching me that I think I'll let you tell—the joke on me. In fact, I think I'll tell it myself. It would be mean to keep so much joy from Jane and David."

Two hours later Mr. Nibbles, sitting on a tree near the float, saw the whole party embarking in boats and canoes for a trip to one of the islands, and made farewell remarks to them as they left.

"I'd like to take him," said Martin longingly, "but he might get away. Let's play we're going to discover something. Will you, Miss Hilda? Will you, Mr. Anthony?"

"Yes," answered Anthony Wayne, rowing with strong, even strokes. "There are several things I should like to discover." He was tanned and freckled, and his thick hair, ruffled by the breeze, was red-brown in the sunlight. But even when he smiled, as he was smiling now at the boy curled up at his feet, there was always a wistful, puzzled look in his eyes which brought a lump into Hilda's throat.

"See Jane paddle standing up," she said suddenly. "She's as graceful and strong as if she had lived in the woods always."

"When I see anything of that kind I seem to know how to do it right away," Anthony Wayne



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murmured, "but except by flashes, nothing comes back to me."

"It will come. We're all sure of it." Hilda's voice and eyes would have given any one courage, and the young man's face brightened.

"I'm going to be sure, too," he said quickly. "It shall come, and it will be you—and all the other kind friends—who have made life possible for me."

"And me?" Martin laid his brown head on Anthony Wayne's knee and looked anxiously at him. "You mean me, too, don't you?"

"Almost more than any one else. You and I are chums, aren't we, old fellow?"

"Sure. And Miss Hilda and I are always going to take care of you. She said——" and then, a succession of shouts attracting Martin's attention to a race going on between Jane and Stanley, he forgot to fill out his sentence, and Hilda drew a breath of relief and looked anywhere except at Anthony Wayne.

"Good for you, Stan; you didn't insult me by weakening at the last minute because I'm a girl," Jane said gaily, as she paddled in to shore just behind the winning canoe. "You do it wonderfully. I'm going to get you to give me some points."

Stanley looked pleased, and realized suddenly



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that this was the first time for over a week that Jane had spoken with such cordial good-fellowship, and that he had been missing it.

"I had to put in my best work to beat you," he answered quickly. "Where did you and David learn to paddle so well?"

"Oh, summers—before we came to Belhaven." And then some one called Jane and she departed.

Stanley, helping to beach the boats and unload baskets, wondered if there really had been a difference in Jane lately. As he thought it over he remembered that once or twice it had seemed almost as if she were avoiding him. "Probably we were feeling so blue over Rob that we all seemed different to each other." Which was a very sensible conclusion, but somehow failed to satisfy him. The summer was doing much for Stanley. He was beginning to think things out; to realize that there was always a point of view different from his own in regard to most of the questions that confronted him, and that it was profitable business to find out the other fellow's side before getting offended. Which, after all, was a great deal to learn in one short summer.

"Stan! Stan! Will you please be a perfect duck and come and help me fish?" pleaded Carol, rushing up to him, all excitement. "No one else



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seems to want to begin right away, and I'm crazy to catch the first one."

"All right. Come on. Here, Molly, let me carry that basket. What are the others going to do first, Carol?"

"Oh, build a fireplace or something. I tried to make Sylvia fish, too, but she won't. She's no sport, but she says she'll stand near and applaud me."

Near the center of the island, and within ear-shot of the place where the others had chosen to build their stone fireplace, was a rustic bridge flung across a canal which cut the island in two. Here Carol decided to stand with her pole and, as she said, catch the fish for supper.

She discreetly turned her head while Stanley was impaling a fat worm on the hook, and looked at Sylvia who was back of her, leaning on the other side of the bridge, watching the boys and Jane and Molly.

"You might stand beside me, Sylvy," she said in an aggrieved tone, but Sylvia, without moving, answered sweetly, "Let me know the minute you catch one, and I'll shout for you."

"I'll come back and take the fish off," Stanley said as he helped her swing her line over. "Just speak when you're ready."

To Carol it seemed hours that she stood there.



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Once in a while she pulled up the hook, half hoping that the bait might be gone, and that she could vary the monotony by calling on Stanley. Suddenly her whole figure grew tense with excitement and her hands trembled. That was a nibble! She was sure of it. She must wait a little for fear of scaring the fish away. Ah! that was a stronger pull—the real thing. Something was tugging at the line!

With a shriek of excitement Carol swung her line, with a struggling fish on the end of it, out of the water—into the air—and across the bridge—where it came down and neatly fastened a projecting end of the hook into the back of Sylvia's blouse.

"Oh-ouch! Take it off—take it off!" screamed Sylvia, whirling around wildly, and in her gyrations displaying the flapping fish to her startled friends. "Oh—it's a whale! I know it is."

Stanley ran for the bridge, but Don was ahead of him. "Is it in you or only in your waist, Sylvia?" he asked anxiously. "Don't jump around so. I can't get it out if you do."

"I—I have to," Sylvia almost sobbed; "it—it isn't in me, but it's that great—cold—wet fish flapping on my b-back. Oh, please take it off, Don."

The next instant the hook was out, and the fish, all of five inches long, was displayed before Sylvia's astonished gaze.



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"Is it big enough to cook?" asked Carol in a meek voice, daring now to approach her victim. "I think I've fished enough for one day."

"I should think you had," Sylvia retorted with real irritation. "When you're going to try it again let me know, and I'll stay five miles away."

And then Carol suddenly felt weak in the knees, and sat down on the bridge and looked up beseechingly at her friend. "I—I can't help it, Sylvy," she gasped. "I've got to laugh. You looked so f-funny. And you told me to let—to let you know when I caught one."

Fortunately Sylvia's sense of humor waked at that, and saved the day. "Laugh all you want to," she said with a giggle. "Only, if you wish me for a friend, you've got to let Don throw that poor, little, thin fish into the water again. It's too young to be out alone." Which being done, peace was restored, and they all had their laugh out.

After the fireplace was built they explored the island, and as Mr. Dodd had told them that each party living in Porcupine Lodge had given it a different name, they called it, to Martin's deep delight, "Joy Island." In the meantime, Uncle Stephen and Frederick Prescott had been out on the lake doing some real fishing, and by the time they came in there were corn and potatoes and



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coffee almost ready, and hot rocks waiting for the fish. Supper was a delicious and satisfying feast, and later on, in the clear twilight, they paddled home, singing as they went.

"I've had the very strenuousest day of my existence," yawned Carol, when Jane had shut the door of their little cabin. "Not even porcupines could scare me or keep me awake to-night." And with this bold avowal on her lips she gave a little shriek, and jumped behind Jane at the sound of a knock.

"It's only some nonsense of the boys," Jane said, coming back from an investigation, and tossing a note to Carol. "I noticed Spinksy and Don had their heads together over something."

Carol stood near the light and opened the folded paper. "Listen to this," she giggled.

### *"Courteous Carol"*

"Nice little Carol, teaching friend to row,  
Thought it could not be polite  
To turn her back, and so  
Face to face they sat and pulled,  
Wondered why boat would not go,  
Wriggled, struggled, panted, puffed,  
Till Stanley came to show."

"Wretches!" said Carol. "I s'pose I'll never hear the last of that. But hear this one."



# Porcupines and Fish

*"To the Fisheress*

"If for your fish you have no place,  
It is a pretty knack  
To stand your friend across a bridge,  
And hook it on her back.

"Don't mind her painful screams and yells.  
She may not like its playful ways.  
But what use is a friend if she  
Won't stand for that on fishing days?

"N. B.—The poets regret that the meter doesn't match, but the idea is all there."

"Those go in my memory book," said Carol.  
"And I don't mind if you do all tease me. I'm not going to give up trying to be an out-of-door girl. I can do something at it even if I can never come up to you and Molly."

Carol in her self-effacing moments was most appealing, and Jane was all encouragement at once. "Of course you can do a lot—particularly if you have Stan to teach you."

Being last out of bed Carol put out the light before she answered. Then she said slowly, "I'm going to like Stan. I feel it coming. He's been just like a nice, stern—father to me to-day."

Jane giggled sleepily.

"Oh, you may laugh, but I'll tell you one thing, Jane Stuart: this time that boy's reformed for keeps—mark my words."

"Perhaps," murmured Jane.



## CHAPTER XV

“WHO IS YOUR UNCLE?”

THE August days flew by, filled to the brim with good times and pleasant companionship. There were tramps in the woods with Frederick and Hilda Prescott, who knew any number of interesting things about trees and birds and flowers. There were lunch-parties at Joy Island, with the home-coming in the late afternoon, and jolly evenings around the big open fire in the living-room of the lodge. The days were perceptibly shorter now, and, in the morning and at night, there was already a decided hint of autumn in the air.

Carol, who, to the surprise of all, had persistently kept on with her idea of athletic training, was so proud of herself and so satisfied with results that she could not refrain from talking about it.

“Look at this—this brown thing,” she said, laying her small hand on Sylvia’s white one, and gazing admiringly at the contrast in color. “I’m at least three shades darker than you are, Sylvia, and we used to match up pretty well.”

“It’s only too true,” agreed Sylvia with a little



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

sigh. “I’m hopeless about rowing and canoeing, or any other sport. I think I’m a fairly good walker, though.”

“Of course you are. Who says not?” demanded Donald, coming out on the piazza of the Lodge where the two girls were sitting.

It was nine o’clock, with brilliant sunshine and a breeze that set every one vibrating in tune to it.

“I feel that I can walk miles,” Carol said with enthusiasm. “But I shall hold myself in on account of Sylvia.”

“Don’t you worry about Sylvia. She’s all right,” Donald responded with such confidence that Sylvia was animated by the immediate desire to prove his words. “Are you both all ready to start?”

“Yes; we’re waiting for the others. It’s a perfect shame that Hilda twisted her ankle yesterday. Look at the callouses I got rowing, Don.” Carol extended her palms for his inspection. “I can just see my mother’s face when I show her those.”

“Perfectly awful. Where are they?” teased David, looking over Don’s shoulder. “Say, Jane and Molly are not quite ready, and Mrs. Janes sent out word by me that we four better start ahead, and they’ll catch up with us in a little while.”

“I call that an insult. Don’t you, Sylvia?” Carol got up, looking, in her short skirt and stout



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

boots, very unlike the Carol of a few weeks previous. "Anyway, I'm glad to start. Let's go ahead so fast they won't catch us."

"Now look here, young person," David admonished, as he swung the strap of a basket around his shoulders. "You and Sylvia, and perhaps the other girls, are going to have about all you want to do to climb that mountain. So don't be too frisky at first."

"Anyway, after we get to a certain place we've got to wait for Mr. Dodd to guide us," added Donald.

"All right, I'll be good. Just wait till I say good-bye to Hilda and Martin. Mr. Anthony Wayne hasn't given up going, has he?"

"Why, no. Why should he?" David stared at her with a puzzled expression in his gray eyes.

"I'm sure I don't know," but as Carol walked away, with Sylvia following, she was saying to herself, "I believe he'd—almost—rather stay here with Hilda—and Martin."

A few moments later the first four pilgrims started in the direction of the mountain which had long been tempting them, and for a while the piazza was deserted.

Then along came Martin Joy, walking with a slow and stately gait in order not to disturb the chipmunk asleep on his shoulder. It was evident





“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?”







## “Who is Your Uncle?”

that Mr. Nibbles had been indulging in exhausting rambles, for he slept soundly, and with perfect confidence in his protector. Martin sat down on the steps and waited for whatever might happen, and in his eyes was the hint of a desire still unsatisfied.

“What are you thinking about, Martin?” questioned Anthony Wayne, sitting down beside him, and putting an arm around his shoulders to the great disgust of Mr. Nibbles.

“Oh, about my street, and Mrs. Bolton and the baby. She’s the fattest baby, and she gets so hot.” He paused for a moment and then added, “It’s so nice and cool here.”

“You’d like to send them some of the coolness, wouldn’t you, little chap?” Anthony Wayne patted the boy’s shoulder approvingly, and Mr. Nibbles, now thoroughly awake and unhappy, whisked off, scolding as he went.

“Good-bye,” Martin said calmly. “You’ll come back when I show you what I’ve got for you to eat.” And then, with a quick return to his previous idea, “That street is hot, Mr. Anthony. And the houses are hot and red. And the shut-up one at the end of the street looks old and tired and—and sorry.”

For an instant the young man’s eyes held the intent, puzzled look of one who searches for an



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

elusive memory. Then the intensity faded, and his usual expression, daily growing more alert, but still half wistful, took its place.

"Martin, you're going to take splendid care of Miss Hilda to-day, aren't you?" he said in a low tone, looking over his shoulder to see whether any one was within hearing.

"Sure," answered Martin serenely. "I always take care of Miss Hilda and my Sylvia."

"Yes, but to-day you must think about it specially. She can't walk, you know, without hurting her foot, and you must wait on her and see that she has everything she wants."

"She thinks she's taking care of me." Martin smiled beamingly, as if that were the best joke possible.

"Never mind; let her think so. She's happier that way. Shake hands on it, old fellow. You'll be responsible for her, won't you?"

"Of course I'll be re-responsible." Martin caught the new word and tossed it back courageously. Then, as his small hand met the larger one in token of compact, he added with startling frankness, "You just love Miss Hilda, don't you?"

"Why—why, we all do, I think." Anthony Wayne looked red and flurried, and got up abruptly. "The others are coming. I must get my basket."



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

Mr. Nibbles, from the safe vantage of a post, watched with interest while Hilda was safely installed by her brother in a steamer-chair on the piazza. Then he cautiously investigated the outside of the boxes and baskets which were to be taken on the pilgrimage.

“Good-bye, Hilda; I’m dreadfully sorry you’re not going,” Jane said. “Does your ankle hurt much?”

“Not now. It had better not, for it kept me awake most of the night. I shall be nice, lively company for Martin.” Hilda smiled and winced at the same time as the ankle gave her an unexpected twinge.

“Every one of us has offered to stay home with you,” said Molly perplexedly. “And we’d be glad to. You know that, don’t you? I believe I shall, anyway.”

“Not with my consent.” Hilda’s usual cheerfulness returned promptly. “Martin and I are looking forward to having this day together. Run along, all of you. Shoo!”

It was not a long morning to Martin, for Hilda knew all sorts of entertaining games and stories, and her foot behaved surprisingly well. Dinner for them both was served on a small table near Hilda’s chair, and Martin was permitted by the indulgent Mrs. Dodd to help her, and act as



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waiter. Mr. Nibbles, tempted by alluring odors, took a seat near by, and watched them expectantly.

"What do you s'pose they're doing this very minute?" demanded Martin, who had felt in duty bound to eat all he could, and was now feeding Mr. Nibbles. "I guess they're eating their lunch, don't you?"

"Perhaps. Though I think they had it earlier. By this time, probably, Jane is striding up the mountain, and the others are trying to keep up with her, and Sylvia and Carol are wishing they were home."

"And Mr. Anthony?" urged Martin almost jealously. Then, as Hilda hesitated, "I bet he's wondering 'bout us and wanting to be here. He thinks an awful lot of you, Miss Hilda."

"Does he?" Hilda leaned back in the steamer-chair, looking somewhat flushed after the exertion of eating.

"Yes; he said he did. He said they all did."

"Oh," murmured Hilda, and the color in her cheeks cooled a little.

"There, Nibbsy, you've had enough." Martin got up from the table briskly. "I think now I'll help take out the dishes. Mrs. Dodd is going to let me wipe 'em."

Beguiled by Mrs. Dodd's fascinating tales of bears, Martin lingered in the kitchen long after



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

the dishes were washed, and when he returned to the piazza Hilda was sleeping so sweetly that the sound of his footsteps, and one fleeting touch on her cheek, failed to make her open her eyes.

“It wouldn’t be taking care of her if I waked her,” he said to himself, feeling a little guilty, and he tiptoed over to the steps, and sat there, scanning the long road, and hoping that the boy with the mail would soon appear.

It was one of his pleasures to run down the road a little way to meet him, and clamber into the wagon, and hold the reins while the horse climbed the last stretch of the winding hill.

So, when he saw him this afternoon, he started, softly at first, for fear of waking Hilda, then running as fast as he could, with his wavy, reddish hair glowing in the sunshine; a gallant little figure full of life and eagerness.

“Say, couldn’t you stop the wagon before you get to the house?” he called softly. “Miss Hilda’s asleep, and I’m re-responsible for her.”

“Sure I could, to oblige a friend.” The boy turned in as he spoke, and brought the horse to a standstill. Martin had thought him a fine fellow before this, but now he was sure of it.

“I s’pose you haven’t got a letter for me?” he inquired with a casual air.

“Well, say now, what do you think? I have.



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I shouldn't have known, only the postmaster had never seen your name and he asked me if you was really up here."

Martin gazed on him with wonder in his eyes! "Let's go into the kitchen and get Mrs. Dodd to open the bag and find my letter," he said eagerly.

Three minutes later he had it in his hand, the first letter he had ever received. "Could you—could you take time to read it to me?" he asked Mrs. Dodd.

"Get Johnny to after he's had his milk and doughnuts. My glasses are up-stairs. He's a real scholar, ain't you, Johnny?"

Blushingly admitting this distinction, the boy finished his refreshments, and he and Martin and the letter went back to the wagon again.

"It's from Boston—sent to Rivercroft Station—and forwarded here," said the scholar, studying the outside of the letter. Martin watched him with awestruck interest while he took a knife from his pocket and carefully slit the envelope.

"Hm—it begins 'Mr. Martin Joy—Dear Sir.' Is that you?"

Martin nodded eagerly. He was looking at the letter, and trying to remember where he had seen the small handwriting, so clear that he could make out many of the words himself. All at once he knew.



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

“It’s from Mr. Bolton,” he cried excitedly. “He showed me how he wrote when he made out bills in the grocery store.”

“You’re dead right,” answered the boy, who had read ahead for a few lines. “It says :

“ ‘MR. MARTIN JOY :

“ ‘*Dear Sir* :—Mrs. Bolton wishes me to inquire for your Health, and to say we are the Same. It is Mr. B. writing. I am well. Cereal our Baby is well. Mrs. Bolton is well and Verry Busy. Mrs. B. says to tell you that you could have knocked her over with a Feather when she saw that Picture of you and your Ma. But she knew it right away. I must not forget to say that dickey the Bird you sent the Baby sings Sweetly. I hope your respected Uncle found Rivercroft without Trouble. Mrs. B. says to tell him she is keeping the House in Order.

“ ‘Your Friend,

“ ‘JOSEPH BOLTON.’

“Some letter, ain’t it?” demanded the boy, turning to his companion for the first time. “Sa-ay! What’s the matter with you? Ain’t you feelin’ well?”

Martin, his ruddy color faded, looked up at him with eyes full of dumb misery. The conviction had seized him with crushing force that his uncle, whoever or wherever he might be, had gone to



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Rivercroft to find him, and he, himself, had not been there.

“What—what do you s’pose he means ’bout my uncle?” he stammered at last, hoping against hope that the boy would have some other explanation.

“Can’t say.” The older boy looked curiously at the little pale face. “Ain’t you seen him? Who is your uncle? Where does he live?”

“I—I don’t know,” answered Martin, paling still more under these questions.

“Say, kid, you’d better go lie down somewheres. The sun’s been pretty hot to-day.” He kept a firm hold on Martin’s wrist as the child got out of the wagon without a word. “You show the letter to the lady that’s asleep. She’ll tell you about it,” he added encouragingly.

“I can’t—if she hasn’t waked up. She didn’t sleep any all night. Mr. Anthony told me to take care of her. Thank you for reading the letter. Good-bye.” Martin plodded slowly toward the house, a little pale ghost of the boy who had run to meet the wagon.

One glance at Hilda was enough to assure him that she still slept. Mrs. Dodd in the kitchen could tell him nothing. He sat down on the steps with the letter held tightly in his hand, and tried to think it out himself.

His uncle had gone to Rivercroft. His uncle—



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

he said the word over lingeringly—his relation—somebody who could tell him about his family. What was it in the letter about a picture? A picture of his mother—and of himself. Did his uncle bring it? An uncle would be next best to a father. His road had brought him a relative, and he had not been there to meet him.

The perspiration stood out on his forehead, and his hair lay in damp, clustering rings. If Miss Hilda would only wake. She could tell him what he ought to do. Would his uncle wait for him at Rivercroft, or, finding him gone, would he go away and never come back again? Should he, Martin, write his uncle a letter? He took a small pencil from his pocket and fingered it doubtfully. Deep within his heart he felt sure that relatives should be written to with ink. He looked once more at the steamer-chair. Perhaps Miss Hilda would say that he ought to go back to Rivercroft at once and find his uncle.

A shaft of sunlight touched his pale face rosily, and glinted in the brown eyes. Why should he wait, he asked himself impatiently. He could walk to the station. He would follow the road until he came to the place where Mr. Dodd had said there was a short cut. Martin knew that in Rivercroft a short cut meant a field, with flowers growing beside the path. And trains—why, of course trains



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were going all the time—and if he explained to the conductor—he drew a deep breath and got up from the steps softly. The pencil, which he had forgotten he held, rattled to the ground, but Hilda slept on peacefully.

Martin picked up the pencil, thought for a moment, painstakingly wrote something on the back of the letter he held, and laid it on the little table which stood near Hilda's chair. Then he looked doubtfully in the direction of the kitchen and shook his head. The next moment he was running down the hill as fast as his legs would carry him.

An hour later, when the sun was just dipping behind the highest mountain, Hilda opened her eyes suddenly at the sound of footsteps on the piazza, to find Anthony Wayne looking at her with penitence in his gaze.

"I'm sorry to wake you," he said at once. "You needed the sleep so much. Is the ankle better?"

"Yes, thanks. And judging by the looks of everything I must have made up hours of sleep. Where are the others?"

"Somewhere on the way home, I suppose. I didn't go to the top of the mountain. I had the curious feeling that I must come back—that something was happening to you or to Martin." He



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laughed with a certain embarrassment in his manner, and rubbed his hand over his forehead as if it hurt him.

“Does your head ache?” Hilda asked sympathetically. “I’m going to make you a cup of tea — Oh, I suppose you won’t let me get up and walk.”

“I should say not. And tea wouldn’t help my head. It’s got to ache itself out, I think. Are you sure you’re quite all right?”

“Very sure. Martin and I had a fine morning together, and then he stayed with Mrs. Dodd, and I read myself to sleep with this. Have you seen this article?” She picked up a magazine from the table beside her, and something dropped to the floor.

“You’ve had some mail, evidently,” Anthony Wayne said, picking up the letter which had fallen, and restoring it to her.

Hilda turned the envelope to look at the address; turned it back to read the childish scrawl which said, “Read this leter. I’ve gone to find him. Martin.”

“What does this mean?” She pulled the letter from the envelope, and read once and then again Mr. Bolton’s puzzling communication. “Can you make anything out of it?” Her voice was sharp with anxiety, and she sat up in the chair, and



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began to throw off the covering which impeded her.

"Wait a minute," said Anthony Wayne, putting a restraining hand on her arm. "I don't understand this, but I'll find Mrs. Dodd right away. Perhaps Martin is with her now."

It did not need his return, accompanied by Mrs. Dodd, to assure Hilda that Martin had gone, for the cold certainty of it was chilling her even before the sound of his footsteps had died away.

"If he'd only come in and told me what was in the letter," ended Mrs. Dodd anxiously, when she had finished telling them all she knew about Martin's afternoon. "He was just as happy as a kitten out there with me after dinner. And then he said he'd got to go and take care of Miss Hilda."

"Don't," begged Hilda, turning away her face.

"He'd try to go back to Rivercroft," said Anthony Wayne with a cheerfulness that wouldn't have deceived any one, "and, of course, he'd follow the road—he's such an intelligent little chap he can't get lost. I'll go after him this minute." His hand went to his forehead again, and pressed hard for an instant, and Hilda saw his face grow white with pain.

"You must go into the house, Hilda, and remember to keep that foot up. You see that she does it, will you, Mrs. Dodd?" he added, as that



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good woman followed him out of Hilda's hearing, and spoke in a low tone.

“You know Martin's been to the station once or twice with Mr. Dodd,” she said with keen anxiety, “and Mr. Dodd pointed out to him what we call the short cut—it leads right off from that big tree that was struck by lightnin'. I heard 'em talkin' about it afterward, and the child was that interested.” Mrs. Dodd glanced over her shoulder at Hilda, and then dropped her voice still lower. “It's all right if you know the way, but there's a swampy place—the kind that it's dangerous to git into—— Oh, my goodness, why did Mr. Dodd ever tell him 'bout a short cut?” she broke off almost angrily. “I'll give you a lantern, Mr. Wayne, and you go as quick as you can. Then I'll blow the horn, and try to get the men here.”

Hilda, limping her way into the living-room, heard the sound of the horn, and realized that there was no immediate response. A few moments later Mrs. Dodd came into the room with a conspicuously cheerful air, and began to pile up the logs more securely in preparation for lighting the fire.

“I forgot that Mr. Dodd told the men they might quit their work early to-day, and go over to Smith's Corner,” she said without looking at Hilda.

“Is that near—near the station?”



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"No; it ain't in the same direction at all." Mrs. Dodd's voice was grimly pleasant.

Suddenly Hilda buried her head in the sofa-cushions with a little sob. "I—I ought not to have gone to sleep," she faltered.

"Now, look here, don't you go blamin' yourself. It won't make it a bit better. It's daylight yet, and that young man's a good walker, and if he's clever enough——" Mrs. Dodd paused and looked at the back of Hilda's head with a penetrating gaze. "Is he—is he all right—in his head?" she asked significantly. "I suspicioned from somethin' Mr. Eliot said that——"

"Of course he is." Hilda sat up indignantly and wiped her eyes with a ruthless hand. "He has dreadful headaches, and he can't—well, he can't remember—much—that has happened to him before this, but he's perfectly intelligent. And—and so fond—of Martin." She brought out the last words jerkily, and sat there staring at the creeping flames and biting her lips.

The next minute Mrs. Dodd's motherly arms were around her, and her head was on the good woman's comfortable shoulder.

"There, there, you poor little thing, you're worryin' 'bout 'em both, ain't you?" was all she said, but Hilda felt comforted and not so much alone.



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

“I’m going to get supper now. They—I mean the others—ought to be here soon, though them mountain trips do take longer sometimes than you’d expect,” Mrs. Dodd said presently, poking the fire into shape, and lingering a little as if loth to leave. “P’raps you’d like to come out in my kitchen for a while.”

“I think I’ll stay here. I can see the road as long as the light lasts.”

“Well, don’t count on seein’ ’em yet a while. It’ll be dark, I think, before you can rightly expect anything.”

Hilda sat alone and watched the graying road, while shadows crept into the big living-room, filling it with a darkness almost tangible. Mrs. Dodd bustled in with a lamp, but Hilda begged her not to leave it just yet. It was lighter outside, she could still see the road, she protested; and if she wanted to move about, there was the firelight.

Another long time went by. The fire crackled and sputtered, and finally settled itself into a glowing crimson flower which stood out boldly from the darkness. Hilda turned away from the window with a quivering sigh; she could no longer see the road. And now the shadows in the room seemed to close in upon her, and she hated to be alone.



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Suddenly there were sounds—some one laughed and some one else was shouting a greeting to Mrs. Dodd. The next moment they all poured into the living-room, and Mrs. Dodd came at the same time with the lamp.

“Well, Hild’chen, why in the dark? Have you had a good day? Did you get word from us long ago from Anthony Wayne?” Her brother’s questions were poured out before Hilda could get in a word. Then breathlessly she told them about Martin, and showed the letter.

Stanley was at the door again before she had finished. “Oh, come on,” he urged. “I can’t bear to think of the kid being out by himself now.” It was only the darkness he was thinking of, but Mrs. Dodd, who had slipped around from the kitchen with lanterns, met him on the front piazza and told him what she had told Anthony Wayne.

After the boys had gone the girls gathered about the fire, and wondered over the letter, and tried to tell Hilda something of the day’s excursion. But through it all they were listening with an intensity that fairly hurt.

“Hark! What’s that!” Jane said suddenly, and sprang to the door and flung it open to the cool air. From far down the road came again the shout which had caught her attention.

“They’re calling ‘found,’” she cried, snatching



## “Who is Your Uncle?”

up her sweater. “Come on, Molly, let’s go down the road and meet them.”

Ten minutes later Anthony Wayne walked in with Martin in his arms. The boy, bedraggled from waist to shoes, was dazzled by the sudden light, and blinked wearily, but his small, pale face was full of triumphant happiness.

“He was lost; I found him,” he explained in a tired little voice, tightening the clasp of his arms around the young man’s neck, and laying his cheek against his. The light fell full upon the two, heightening the red-brown of the hair, bringing out the shape of the faces, showing, in the man’s eyes, an expression those around him had never seen before.

Jane, gazing in bewilderment from one to the other, suddenly put her hand to her forehead as though her brain were reeling.

“Look at that!” she cried suddenly. “Don’t you all see it? The resemblance, I mean! Why, you are—you must be—Mr. Bolton meant——”

“Yes,” interrupted the young man joyously. “I am—I must be, and Mr. Bolton meant me to be—Martin’s uncle, and my name is Alexander Warren.”



## CHAPTER XVI

### MARTIN WANTS AN AUNT

"Now, Hilda, let's see if I have it right," said David, balancing a block of paper on his knee, and trying to look as if he liked writing letters. "Martin's mother was Dr. Alec Warren's sister, and she married without her father's consent, and never saw any of her family again. That's straight so far, isn't it?"

It was the morning after the never-to-be-forgotten day when Martin Joy and his uncle found each other, and every one seemed to be writing letters to spread the glorious news. Hilda, again ensconced in the steamer-chair on the piazza, was acting as a bureau of information to settle all doubtful points.

"And then his father took him out of school, and off to live in Europe, and he let him think his sister was dead. Glory! That was the cruelest thing to do, wasn't it? It makes me feel fierce just to hear about it." David scribbled rapidly, and his face looked severe. "Mrs. Janes and I are going to write this to mother, so I'm getting



## Martin Wants an Aunt

the points straight," he explained. "We were all so excited and joyful last night that I got a little mixed. Now, how long was it before Dr. Alec found the letter and picture?"

"Just twelve years later, when his father died, and he had to settle up his affairs," answered Hilda. "The letter was dated five years before that, and on the envelope his father had written 'unanswered.'"

"Great Scott! How could he, with his daughter and her baby looking out of the picture at him? And her husband was dead, and she was ill, and she wanted to come back to the old house, didn't she?"

"Yes," answered Hilda pityingly. "Her brother started across the ocean as soon as he could, hoping that it wasn't too late to find her."

"And then he thought he'd open the old house," murmured David. "And the agent got Mrs. Bolton to clean it for him. My! how it all worked out, didn't it? I don't see, though, why the agent didn't know about Martin and his mother when they came back there."

"Why, Dr. Alec's father put it into the hands of a man who didn't know anything else about his affairs. And the neighborhood had changed completely since the Warrens lived there."

David pondered over the situation for a moment or two. "I see," he said slowly. "The father



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

just cut loose from everything, and went to Europe and—and kind of lost himself and his son. I suppose that's what Dr. Alec meant when he said he should have to hunt up his relatives and old friends. Well, thanks, Hilda. I must go now and find Janesy. I bet she'll think up a dozen questions I can't answer."

David departed, but before he was out of sight, another person began to talk to the girl on the piazza.

"Miss Hilda!" Kenneth, who had stretched himself on the ground not far away to write to Mr. Chope, got up and came to the piazza railing. "Miss Hilda, how could he think his sister was dead, and not know that she was married?" he queried perplexedly. "Now I'd know it if Jane or Judy got married."

"Yes, but his sister was ten years older than he. And he was a quiet, shy little boy who was sent to boarding-school when he was eight years old, and hardly went home even for vacations. And he was only thirteen when he was taken to Europe. You see he was rather afraid of his father, Ken, and he didn't have any mother, which makes a great difference."

"Jiminy Crickets! I should think it would!" Kenneth buried both hands in his pockets, and stared into the distance as if he were trying to imagine a like situation. "Jiminy!" he repeated



## Martin Wants an Aunt

helplessly after a moment, and then, because he never was afraid to show his feelings, he added, "Say, Miss Hilda, thinking about that makes me want to see mother awfully. Honestly, I'm glad we've got only three more days here."

Kenneth went back to his pencil and tablet, and Hilda added several lines to the letter she was writing to her father. Then Molly came out from the living-room, pen in hand. "Hilda, did Dr. Warren say he went to school in England and Switzerland before he began to study to be a doctor?" she inquired.

"Yes, and in every school he went to he was always lonely and unhappy. Oh, Molly, isn't it dreadful for a child to be brought up in that way?"

"I should say so. Well, I must go back. I'm writing father all about our latest sensation, and trying to make a very correct report in a small, neat handwriting." Molly ended with a laugh, and Hilda, who knew her cherished ambition, smiled understandingly.

"You want to persuade him that you're just fitted to be a librarian, I suppose."

"Oh, Hilda, if he only will let me." Molly lingered a little and forgot her haste to finish her letter. "I do so want to study for it. But father thinks girls ought to stay at home after they fin-



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

ish High School. And then there's Stan. I don't believe he'd be happy with me away, though—though I never seem to do much for him.”

“Perhaps you do more than you think,” comforted Hilda. “Anyway, Stan's getting to be a perfect trump. We've all noticed it.”

“Oh, have you? I haven't dared to mention it to any one, nor talk about it to him, nor even write to father about it, for fear of breaking the spell.” Molly's soft brown eyes were suddenly full of tears. “I'm not crying because I'm unhappy,” she said, winking them away directly, “but because it takes such a load off my mind to have you tell me that. It—it isn't easy to be an older sister, and feel all the time that you're taking the wrong way with your brother. Good-bye; I'm really going this time. I'm afraid if I talk any more about Stan it'll be ‘rainy weather,’ as David says,” and with a wave of the hand, Molly vanished.

Hilda sat quite still for a few moments, thinking about sisters and brothers, and just as she was about to begin on her letter again, Jane dashed across the space between her cabin and the Lodge, and Carol and Sylvia appeared almost at the same moment from the living-room.

“Don't tell me you're all three writing letters,” protested Hilda.



## Martin Wants an Aunt

"Sylvy and I have finished," said Carol.

"Well, I haven't," Jane declared. "Spinksy and I started to write it for mother like a detective story, but we got discouraged. There's one thing I can't settle yet. I don't see why the agent that had charge of the house didn't write and make inquiries about Dr. Warren. I'm quite proud of myself because I can say his name so neatly."

"Why, the agent thinks he's out west on business," explained Hilda. "Dr. Alec had planned to go directly to the little western town his sister had written from. But, naturally, hearing what Mrs. Bolton had to tell made him change his mind. He didn't tell the agent about that, and he cautioned the Boltons not to mention it. He says he can remember having a queer feeling that, if he told about it, it wouldn't come true. And he was in a perfect fever of doubt and anxiety when he was pitched out of the machine. I don't wonder he lost his memory."

"I suppose Mr. Bolton wrote the names for him," said Jane thoughtfully. "It was the same writing in Martin's letter. It all fits in like a picture puzzle, doesn't it? Except"—she frowned a little—"I can't see why he didn't have his sister's picture with him when he came to Rivercroft."

"He did. He can remember having just taken



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

the envelope that held it out of his pocket when the automobile began to go wrong. Of course it was flung out of his hand, and Fritz thinks we may be able to find it when we get back."

"Well, it isn't strange that the shock did something to him when he saw Martin up to his waist in that swampy place," declared Sylvia, shuddering at the thought of Martin in such danger.

Jane's eyes grew big and dark. "He said something seemed to snap in his head, and then he knew who he was, and that Martin was his nephew. Wasn't it wonderful? And who would have supposed that big, shut-up house at the end of Martin's street would have such a story? I'm so glad we happened to go to the Art Museum that afternoon, Sylvy."

"Perhaps Dr. Warren isn't. If we had left Martin with Mrs. Bolton, he and his uncle would have met sooner, and Dr. Warren wouldn't have had the accident."

"Yes, but he wouldn't have known *Us*," remonstrated Carol. "He must think that makes up for losing his memory for one summer, doesn't he, Hilda?"

"I don't know—that is I'm sure he's glad to know us," Hilda answered hurriedly.

"I should say as much. And I think I'd be willing to lose some of his memories if I had 'em."



## Martin Wants an Aunt

Carol got up from the heap of cushions on which she had been sitting, and stood for a moment gazing at the lake, the mountains, the cloudless blue of the sky.

"Why, Jane, I believe I'm getting some of your ways," she said suddenly, turning to Jane with a half-startled expression. "I never knew myself to look so long at the landscape and really love it. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Great." Jane wheeled around and looked, too. "When Spinksy and I were very little children," she went on dreamily, "mother used to have us look at sunsets and stars and trees and rainbows and—and brooks rushing over stones, and colors everywhere. I never can see anything lovely without thinking of her. I must go this minute and finish my letter, because I didn't write to her yesterday." Jane started off as if the thought of her mother had given wings to her feet, but before she got out of hearing she paused in her flight.

"After we finish the letter, Spinksy and Don and I are going to read 'Great Expectations,'" she called, "and if any one wants to listen——" she was off again, leaving her sentence unfinished.

"I'm going into the house to sing a while, and then I think I'll listen," Sylvia said. "Don was telling me the first part of the story while we were



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

climbing yesterday, and I got quite interested. Don't you want to come, Carol?"

"No, thank you. You know I should probably be dreadfully bored."

After Sylvia had gone, Carol still stood there, leaning against a post, and looking far away. Suddenly she turned to Hilda with a half-serious, half-mocking expression on her changeable face. "Perhaps you won't believe me, but honestly, I've been thinking hard for the last few minutes," she said lightly. "Of course I talk so much nonsense you really can't tell that I'd truly like to be in Jane's class in most ways. But this summer has shown me that I can learn to do and to like several things that I never have done and liked before. Goodness! I said all that right straight off like a lecturer, didn't I? I couldn't do it again for a million dollars. It—it really embarrasses me to talk seriously."

Carol dropped down on the heap of cushions again, and looked at Hilda with all the mockery gone from her eyes. "Say, Hilda, I wish you'd do something for me when we get back to Belhaven," she went on. "I want you to make me like reading. Oh, please don't say no till I finish telling you about it."

"You see Jane and David and Rob and Don all just love it, and they don't know they look down



## Martin Wants an Aunt

on me for not caring for it, but they do. I'm a perfect dummy when they begin to talk about their favorite books, and the worst of it is"—she paused, and frowned as if the memory of past things hurt—"the worst of it is that now they just take it for granted, and don't—don't expect anything from me."

"We can't all care equally for the same things," Hilda said slowly, wondering just how she was going to meet this case. "I think liking to read is natural to some people——"

"Oh, of course, I know that," Carol interrupted, "but listen. When I went to Rivercroft this summer I was lazy, and I knew it, and I didn't care if I was. Then—somebody—talked to me nicely about it. Now—well, of course I'm nothing wonderful even now, though I pretend to think I am, but, at least, I don't hate to be energetic the way I did before. And just by making myself wear those thick boots I've got so I don't mind 'em."

Carol's air was that of a martyr, but her face was so earnest that Hilda suppressed the smile that wanted to come, and nodded understandingly.

"It's such a relief to have some one take me seriously," Carol went on with a sigh of satisfaction. "The others expect me to be just foolish, and, of course, I can't disappoint them. But don't



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

you see, Hilda, if some one had made me notice the sun and moon and stars when I was a child, the way Jane's mother made her, or had read to me as Mrs. Stuart does with her children, I should probably have got into the habit of loving beautiful things, and liking to read."

"Very likely," responded Hilda, nodding again.

"And even now"—Carol's manner was sweetly persuasive—"even now, if some kind person, you, for instance, would take me in hand, she might be able to give me the habit of reading. Anyway"—her face brightened perceptibly—"anyway, I might get as resigned to it as I am to heavy shoes."

"You might, of course," agreed Hilda, laughing in spite of herself. "I'll do all I can to help, and I like you for wanting to do it. But, Carol, why don't you go and listen now? I can see David and Don starting——"

"I couldn't possibly. I've talked so much about not liking to read that I must get a little start before I dare to break into their ranks. I'll find Stan, and get him to go out in the canoe with me. There won't be time for many more lessons, and he's been perfectly dandy about helping me."

"Doesn't Stanley like to read?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Every one else does. I must find out, and if he doesn't I'll give him a few points on what a valuable habit it is." Carol



## Martin Wants an Aunt

laughed impishly, quite restored to her usual good humor. "Can I do anything for you, Hilda, before I go? Bring you anything or ——"

"No, thank you. I'm only keeping my foot up this morning to be sure that it's all right. I really walk very well to-day."

Carol went half-way the length of the piazza, then turned abruptly and came back to Hilda's chair. "For goodness' sake don't tell any one what I've been talking about," she implored. "You know I'm always reforming. And, somehow, in spite of these lovely calloused places, and the bump on my head where I went over backward in the boat, and about a million bruises and scratches, I haven't any too much faith in my stick-to-it-iveness. Wasn't that a nice word? I think I shall copyright it."

Hilda laughed and promised, and for some time after Carol had left, sat there with a half-smile on her lips, thinking of the confidences which had been poured into her ears. Then Martin came into her mind, and she realized all at once how the little lad, with his eager responsiveness, and his faith in what the future might bring, had crept into her heart. She wondered if Dr. Warren would go back to Europe to live and thus take Martin quite out of their lives. And would Anthony Wayne be wholly lost, or would there be a trace of him in



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

Alec Warren? With the question came a little sigh, and she started suddenly on her letter again.

Presently, at the sound of voices, she looked up to see the two she had last been thinking of coming toward her. Martin, pale and tired from his experience of the day before, had, nevertheless, the light of happiness in his clear eyes, and gripped his uncle's hand as if he would never let him go.

"What do you—what do you think, Miss Hilda?" he said beamingly as they sat on the piazza railing. "My Uncle Alec made me stay in bed this morning, and he brought me my breakfast, and he took—care—of me." There was a lingering on the last words which spelled ecstasy. Hilda, looking at him with her friendly smile, felt her own eyes grow hot with sudden tears.

"Anthony Wayne would have done it just as well," teased his uncle.

"No," asserted the boy with delightful confidence. "No one but my old uncle could do it quite so be-yutifully. And we've been talking 'bout—may I tell Miss Hilda what we've been talking 'bout, Uncle Alec?"

"Of course. Don't you and I always have to do as Miss Hilda tells us, and how could we plan anything unless she knew about it?"

"He's joking, isn't he, Martin?" Hilda said quickly. "But please tell me."



## Martin Wants an Aunt

“Why, you know the sorry-looking house at the end of my street; the house where my Uncle Alec and my mother used to live?”

Hilda nodded affirmatively.

“Well, we’re going to make that into a glad kind of a house where—where all the people in the neighborhood can come—and have good times.” Martin put his head back against his uncle as if even the exertion of talking were too much for him this morning. “You tell her, Uncle Alec,” he begged.

“You’ve told her almost all yourself, old fellow. I thought of it when I first saw the house after so many years,” he went on, looking as if he were quite sure of Hilda’s sympathy. “Something that Martin said this morning brought back to me the idea of making a kind of—neighborhood house of it; where people could come for good times and advice and some of the care they need.”

“And we’re going to ask Mrs. Bolton to cook lots of nice things, and Mr. Bolton to make all the figures, ’cause he makes such be-yutiful ones, and my old umbrella man at the Art Museum is going to be—to be something,” chattered Martin, forgetting his fatigue.

Hilda listened with a queer, forlorn feeling in her heart. They had been so dependent on her all summer, these two, and now, in so short a time, they had gone far ahead in their plans.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"It will be lovely," she said with only a moment's hesitation. "That house is 'sorry-looking' as Martin says, and nothing could be better than to make it smile on the neighborhood, and be helpful."

"She says just the right thing, Martin, do you understand?" exulted Alec Warren. "We're to make it 'smile on the neighborhood.'"

"Yes, and if children come there 'thout any relations," Martin was now started on his favorite subject, "like me before my Uncle Alec found me, why, then, my Uncle Alec is going to be their uncle, and I'm going to be their cousin."

"That's perfectly fine. You know how good it will seem to them, don't you?" Hilda's voice held the heartiest interest, and she patted the small brown hand which Martin had laid on hers.

"I—guess—I—do," the boy answered slowly, and then, all at once, his eyes grew big with the kindling of a new idea. "Why—why can't you lend us Grandpa Prescott?" he stammered, "and couldn't you, oh, Miss Hilda, darling, couldn't you be their aunt?"

"I'll—think about it," faltered Hilda, trying to speak lightly, and wishing she could laugh at what was, of course, the best joke in the world.

"That means yes, Uncle Alec; she always—always does what we want when she promises, 'I'll think about it,'" cried Martin, enchanted. He



## Martin Wants an Aunt

slipped off the piazza railing, and flung his arms around Hilda's neck. "Now I'm going to find my Sylvia, and tell her that Miss Hilda will be an aunt—will be an aunt," he chanted happily, and started for the door of the house.

"Oh, Martin," pleaded Hilda, and stopped aghast.

"Hold on," said his uncle, catching him by the belt. "Now, listen; we don't tell all our very best plans until we're sure they're going to come true. And you can't go around collecting relatives by force."

This was a shock to Martin's feelings, and he stole a shamefaced look at Hilda. "But, Uncle Alec," he said coaxingly, "I think—just perhaps—Miss Hilda would like to be one, and it wouldn't be polite ——"

Alec Warren wheeled around to the girl in the chair, and something in her face made his own flame with happiness.

"Oh, Hilda," he began, and then the sound of footsteps on the piazza made them all look to see Mr. Eliot coming toward them.

"Well, Dr. Warren," he said in his hearty way, blissfully unconscious that he was disturbing any one, "I've been chasing around after you for some time. I believe I used to go to school with your father, and I want to hear more about him."



## CHAPTER XVII

### "WE FALL TO RISE"

"I CAN'T bear to think that I've paddled for the last time on this lake," Jane said soberly, as she watched the boys tie up the canoes. "If it weren't for seeing mother and Judy I should hate to be packing this afternoon, and starting for Rivercroft to-morrow."

"So should I, but I'm really just wild to get back and tell them all I can do," remarked Carol. "I want to show them my muscle."

"They little know how much there is in store for them," David observed solemnly. "Honestly, though, Carol—now I'm not kidding you—I do think you've improved more than any one else in the party. Why, actually, when we get back to Belhaven, I shan't be afraid to ask you to go to walk with me."

"Really!" Carol's tone expressed a withering degree of scorn, but her eyes sparkled. "When you talk of Belhaven it makes the summer seem almost over," she added.

"Only a week more at Rivercroft." It was Stanley speaking now as he strode along beside his



## “We Fall to Rise”

sister. “Somehow I don’t dread school so much as usual.”

Jane, giving him a quick glance, told herself that, if David could only see it, here was more of a change than she could find in Carol. It was hard to believe that this boy, with his head held high and his clear gaze, could be the sulky, unresponsive youth who had started across the fields with her that July afternoon when Martin’s uncle first appeared on the scene.

With one of its quick changes, her mind pictured him again as he had looked in the barn, when the accident to Sylvia had been so narrowly averted. Jane had never yet been able to explain to herself how that afternoon had wrought so speedy a transformation in him, and it still hurt her confidence a little. Thinking of it now, she shrugged her shoulders involuntarily, as if she could in this way shake unwelcome thoughts from her mind.

“Cold, Mrs. Janes?” asked David, dropping his sweater on her shoulders with a pretense of anxiety, and then keeping just out of reach when she tried to return it. “You shivered. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“I did not. I shrugged. I’ll make you shiver, though, if I can get hold of you,” retorted Jane, who knew the weakness of her ticklish twin. And



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

then with a bound she was after him, pursuing, doubling and twisting, soberly determined, until at last she clutched him with a shout of victory.

"That's the end of Davy," Don observed.

"It makes me almost envious to see Jane run. Isn't she strong and splendid?" sighed Sylvia.

"You need something of that to help you bring out that voice of yours," Frederick Prescott said unexpectedly. "You'll find that working out a talent means development in many ways."

"Dear me, why didn't some one say that before? I shouldn't have wasted so much time this summer. Please tell me how to begin."

They were approaching the Lodge now, and they could see Hilda and Alec Warren just coming back from the walk they had been taking. In front of the house, Uncle Stephen was helping Martin and Ken fly kites, while not far away Mr. Nibbles waited, hoping against hope that his noonday meal would not be forgotten.

"Want to feel her pull, Janesy?" Ken said enthusiastically. "Jiminy! There's some air up where she is."

Jane, who had finished disciplining her twin, took the cord on which the kite was tugging, and for the first moment, until she could brace herself strongly, was almost carried off her feet by the strain.



## “We Fall to Rise”

“Take it—somebody,” she gasped. “It’s pulling my arms out by the roots. I—I’ve had enough.”

Stanley, laughing, came to the rescue, and Jane surveyed her hands ruefully.

“Some pull there, ain’t they?” said Mr. Dodd, who had walked out from the kitchen and joined the little group. “You wouldn’t think when it’s so quiet down here that the breeze would be cavortin’ ’round up there to sech an extent. Glory be! Watch her dive!”

The kite, plunging wildly, held their attention for a moment or two, then Mr. Dodd said with his experienced eye on the clouds, “Looks a little mite like we was goin’ to have one of them wind-storms we sometimes git. But I guess not; the conditions ain’t really jest right for it.”

“Are they bad?” queried Jane, who at that moment was starting for the piazza.

“Pretty bad while they last, but soon over. They’re the suddenest things you ever——” Mr. Dodd stopped talking to watch Ken, who by this time had again taken the cord, and was having a lively tussle with the kite. “Hi there! Hold tight, or you’ll lose her!” he shouted.

Every one lingered on the piazza after dinner, and hated to leave to do the packing, small though it was, but finally Hilda made the first move, and the others followed, one by one.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Packing like this is really a joke," said Jane, walking into the cabin where Molly and Sylvia were busy, with her contribution to the partnership trunk in her arms. "Shall I put them in, Molly, or are you arranging to suit your own ideas?"

"Just drop 'em on the bed," Molly replied amiably. "Sylvia's flattered me so much about my packing that I'm willing to do the whole thing."

Jane laughed. "That's the way I feel about cooking. I'm an easy mark if they'll just give me enough compliments. Well, I shall be through in five minutes, unless you'll let me help you."

"Run along. Two people can't pack a trunk at the same time. Tell Carol to bring over her share as soon as she can and it won't take a jiffy for me to put them all in."

"La, la, la. How capable and pleased with ourselves we are," sang Jane, ducking to avoid the balled-up towel Molly threw after her. "You don't seem to appreciate my society, so I'll go and give Carol a push in this direction."

Left alone in her cabin, Jane turned her attention to the suit-case, in which she meant to collect a few articles and leave the rest to be done before going to bed.

"If we didn't have to leave at six o'clock in the



## “We Fall to Rise”

morning I wouldn't touch this now," she said to herself as she dropped a clothes-brush into the bag, and opened the drawer in the little table to see if anything had been left behind. A few minutes later she decided that she had done all that she could do now, and it occurred to her that, as the others were not so far along as she was, she should have time to read a few pages in a book Aunt Caroline had lent her. She didn't care much for the book, but Aunt Caroline did, and she hated to go back to Rivercroft and say she hadn't read it.

"Mercy me! Where is it?" she murmured distractedly when she had searched the cabin. "I took it with me yesterday when we—when we lunched in that little hut in the woods." Suddenly, with the eye of her mind, she saw the book quite plainly, lying open on the rough little bench, just as she had left it when some one called her. It had never entered her thoughts since, and it was Aunt Caroline's, and some one had given it to her. Jane was sure she could remember that there was an inscription on the fly-leaf.

"Oh, bother! I wish she'd never lent it to me," she thought. "Well, anyway, it was only about a mile up the lake, and I can go there and back before supper. Perhaps Spinksy or Don will go with me."



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

But no one was visible when she went out, and, rather than hunt them up, she was just deciding to go by herself when Stanley appeared from somewhere with a clump of delicate ferns in his hand.

"I heard your mother say once that she liked ferns," he said, looking a little shy over it. "I'm going to put them in a tin box with some wet paper, and take them to her. Do you think she'll be pleased, or—or won't she care?"

"She'll be perfectly delighted. I wish I'd been the one to think of it. I couldn't say anything better than that, could I?"

"You certainly couldn't," Stanley agreed, feeling secretly pleased at her hearty manner. "Where are you bound?" he asked as she turned toward the float again.

Jane explained, and grew more determined as she saw that Stan didn't wholly approve of the expedition.

"It's five o'clock, and those clouds look rather funny," he objected. "You can buy another book if you've lost that one."

"I can't buy a book that some one has written in. And those clouds will blow over. Anyway, don't try to stop me, because it won't take long, and I'm going."

Jane said the last words with such decision that Stan yielded at once. "If you'll let me I'll go



## “We Fall to Rise”

with you,” he said, and taking Jane’s not very cordial acceptance for granted, he stopped to put the fern down by the side of the float where it would be cool and damp. He took as much pains with it as though it had been a royal treasure to be carried to some person of great importance, and Jane was secretly touched by his thoughtfulness for her mother.

“Honestly, I can hardly wait to get back to Rivercroft,” she said as they started off in the canoe, both paddling. “I’ve never been away from mother for so long before and I’m wild to see her.”

“So am I. Say, but it’s some work paddling against this breeze, Jane. We ought to come back humming.”

“I hope we do. It’ll be a nice wind-up for this part of the summer, to—to go scooting down the lake just as the glorious sun is beginning to sink behind the mountain tops. Ahem! I hope you like my poetical description.”

“I do. I never realized before how much poetry there is in the word ‘scoot.’ Say, do you remember exactly where we landed to go to that little hut?”

“Oh, yes,” Jane replied with confidence. She had a firm faith in her bump of location, and she was watching the shore sharply.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

There was silence for a little while as they glided evenly through the water. It had grown warmer instead of cooler as the afternoon progressed, and now the breeze against which they had been paddling had died down, and there was an oppressive heaviness about the air.

"Let's not paddle quite so hard," Jane said suddenly. "I'm getting awfully warm. It's just a little way above here that we landed yesterday."

"Girls never can tell distances. I bet it's a good half-mile farther." There was a hint of the once familiar sureness and superiority about Stanley's manner, and Jane felt the old irritation rising in response.

"Well, this is the place. I noticed those three trees that seem to be growing from one root, and right after that we stopped." She tried to make her voice sound pleasant, and she wondered why this boy could always make her feel tempery, even when he didn't mean to.

"All right, it's your party," he said suddenly. "I guess I didn't notice much about it yesterday." Which was all any one could say, but for some reason Jane found herself growing peppery again, because he gave up so soon.

"Do you want to sit in the canoe while I try to find the hut?" Stanley asked as they stopped in the place Jane indicated.



## “We Fall to Rise”

“Oh, no. I’ll go, too,” Jane answered hastily. “Of course I may have hit it a little out of the way. We might have to walk some.”

“Well, that won’t hurt us. Come on ; we can’t be far away.”

Stanley tied the canoe to a stump, and, as he straightened himself, looked, by chance, in the direction from which they had come. “Oh, thunder, Jane, it’s up to us to find that hut as fast as we can, and stay in it,” he said excitedly. “Look at that sky ! Something’s doing, sure.”

Behind them, heaped-up clouds, darkly purple, were rapidly devouring a streaked, copper-colored sky. For the moment the wind had died down into the merest whisper, and there was a heavy silence that hurt Jane’s ears and frightened her.

“Goodness ! This must be one of the storms Mr. Dodd was telling about,” she said nervously. “I’d give a good deal to be in the Lodge, wouldn’t you ? He—he said they’re soon over, though. Mercy ! It’s just as if everything was holding its breath, isn’t it ?” Jane was walking through a path between the trees, leading the way in the direction she supposed the hut to be, and chattering every minute to keep up her courage. “Dear me, by this time I was sure I should see it. It ought ——”

“Keep straight ahead in the direction the canoe



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

was going," interrupted Stanley. "I guess we were a little off in our reckoning. And—and you'd better save your breath—you'll need it."

He fairly shouted the last words, for already there was a dull roar of wind, and the trees began to bend and crack alarmingly. Jane felt her breath almost blown away, and stopped, bewildered, bracing herself for the next gust.

"Keep on! Don't stop!" called Stanley. "There's a clear space a little ahead. It'll be safer."

Jane started on again obediently and for a brief moment found it easier. Then, as though the wind gathered strength during the respite, the storm was upon them again with frightful force. Jane halted, panic-stricken, as a branch crashed to the ground not far ahead; then she dashed on again without a word.

Suddenly—she could not tell whether it was behind or before her—there was the sound of violent rending and cracking, and she paused and crouched involuntarily. The next instant she was carried off her feet by Stanley's rush from behind her, and she measured her length on the ground, and heard, as she went down, the crash of another branch.

For a moment she was dazed and could hardly get on her feet again. She wondered why Stanley





“YOU’RE ALL RIGHT, AREN’T YOU?”







## “We Fall to Rise”

did not speak or offer to help her. The first thing she knew clearly was that the wind was less violent, and she turned, still trembling, to say so to Stan, and was stupidly surprised to find him lying face down upon the ground. The end of the branch, which had evidently caught him as he jumped for her, lay across the lower part of his back.

Jane tugged at the branch, but because of the narrowness of the space between the trees, it resisted her efforts for what seemed to her a long time. She was half-crying as she worked, and her face was white, and scratched by her fall, and her hands smarted from contact with the rough bark. At last she succeeded in pulling the branch from Stanley's body, and, with the strength of her excitement, she managed to roll him over so that he lay on his back.

At that moment he opened his eyes and looked up at her, and an expression of relief flitted across his face. “You're all right, aren't you?” he said with a little effort, and then, “Say, that knocked me silly, didn't it?”

“Oh, Stan, I was scared to death when I saw you on the ground, and I thought I'd never get that branch off.” Jane was trying hard to control herself, and live up to her reputation of knowing what to do in an emergency.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"I heard it—and I saw it coming," the boy murmured, still looking a little dazed; and then, with his face brightening, "I didn't wait for any one else to do it that time, Jane."

"I should say not. If you had where should I be? You gave me an everlasting push, though. I'm shaky yet from it."

"I couldn't stop to say 'Excuse me,'" Stanley answered faintly. "I believe I'll lie here just a minute longer. It sort of knocked the breath out of me when I went down."

The wind had almost entirely died away by this time, but the sky was still darkened, and now it was beginning to rain a little.

"You'd better get up as soon as you can," Jane said anxiously. "We'll go right back to the Lodge. I won't try to find the book."

"All right," and with the words Stanley got up on his elbow, looked at Jane with a startled, questioning stare, and went back again limply.

"That's funny," he said, before she had a chance to speak. And then again, "That's funny. I—I can't seem to use my legs."

"Why, what do you mean? Does it—does it hurt?"

"No. They just—don't seem—to belong to me." Stanley's voice and eyes were full of perplexity. "They—they don't seem—to be—there,"



## “We Fall to Rise”

he added helplessly a moment later. “I’m going to try again. Give me a pull, Jane.”

Jane helped with all her might, but the only result of their combined effort was that Stanley dropped back again with every vestige of color gone from his face, and distress in his eyes.

“Well, I guess that’s no go,” he said, after a minute, with an effort to speak cheerfully. “Perhaps—if I wait a while I can—do it.” He shut his eyes for an instant, and his hands dug into the ground beside him. Then he spoke again quite naturally. “Say, why wouldn’t it be a good idea for you to go back to the Lodge, and get some one to give me a lift?”

Jane looked at him with startled eyes. Into her mind flashed a swift vision of Stanley alone and helpless, with darkness coming on, and rain falling. “Of course I could do that,” she said, trying not to show how frightened she was. “But, after all, Davy’s sure to miss me, and see that the canoe’s gone. And he won’t do anything else till I’m found. I—I don’t believe I could leave you here all alone, Stan.”

Jane fancied that he looked relieved, but all he said was, “Well, you ought not to stay here in the rain, and, perhaps, it might help both of us if you went after them.”

“Perhaps—if I were positive I could find this



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

place again. But it's cloudy, and it will get dark quickly in the woods. I'm not even sure I could go straight back to the canoe. We shall have to take turns shouting and giving the Belhaven whistle. Mark my words, they'll find us before long. And I don't mind this rain a bit."

"You're a good sport, all right," murmured Stanley, a little shakily. "I—I'm glad you're going to stay."

Jane felt a lump in her throat, and swallowed hard to down it. "Got a knife?" she said after a minute. "I want to cut some of these branches and make a little shelter. There's no need of being soaked if we are cast away on a deserted shore."

Stanley demurred, but she persisted in standing up small branches about him until they made a sort of roof, which would do something toward keeping off the rain. His head and shoulders were sheltered by the tree under which he had fallen, and when she had done what she could, Jane sat down with her back against the tree and waited.

Stanley had not spoken for some minutes, but she could see that his eyes were very bright and full of a certain excitement.

"I saw it coming, Jane," he said abruptly. "I was sure it would hit you, and I didn't feel scared, or frozen stiff, or—or the least bit the way I have before." He hesitated for a moment, then went on



## “We Fall to Rise”

without giving her time to answer. “It was like the time the scythe came down, and you saved Sylvia; only then—I couldn’t stir.”

He had twisted himself so that he was looking directly at Jane, and something about her expression made him pause. “Oh, I forgot, you didn’t know I saw the scythe before it fell,” he explained simply. “Well, I did, and I was scared just the way I was when Molly went through the ice. But not to-day.”

There was a triumphant ring in his voice as he said the last words that made Jane catch her breath quickly. Should she tell him that she did know, she asked herself perplexedly. And then, with her question unanswered, she heard herself saying cheerfully, “And now, after to-day you won’t have that horrid old doubt to bother you. Perhaps, if you hadn’t jumped—that branch would have been the end of me.”

“Let’s not talk about it.” Stanley frowned, and turned his head away for an instant. “Don’t you think it’s about time for the shouting to begin?” he inquired.

Jane knew that it wasn’t, but it was a relief to do something, so she gave the Belhaven High School yells until her throat felt rasped. Then, the moment she stopped, the silence of the woods settled down upon them more heavily than before.



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

"Hearing the yells makes me think of Rob," Stanley said quickly. In the graying light she could still see the bright, excited look in his eyes, and it flashed into her mind that he was trying to make the stillness and the long waiting easier to bear.

"Poor old Rob's got his work cut out for him," he went on soberly. "My father wrote us that Mr. Randall's affairs were in very bad shape, and that there won't be much left for Rob and his mother. But Rob's got all kinds of grit. Sometimes he pretends to be lazy, but he isn't."

"No, he isn't," agreed Jane, wishing he would talk about something else.

"You remember the day you got your arm cut?" Stanley harked back to this subject with an unexpectedness that startled his hearer, but, fortunately, in his eagerness to talk, he was unaware that she was less responsive than usual. "Well, you know you wanted some one to get your mother, and I was mighty glad to go, because it seemed as if I must see her. It was harder that time, because I'd been telling myself almost ever since we got to Rivercroft that, if anything else happened, I'd do the right thing. And—and this was the second time—I'd failed." The boyish voice faltered over the last words, and the girl, listening, oppressed by anxiety, realized, more clearly than she ever had, how much all this had meant to Stanley.



## “We Fall to Rise”

“I—I’m afraid you ought not to talk about this—now,” she ventured, not daring to say too much for fear he should think she was frightened about him. As she surely was, though she would not for anything have confessed it.

If he were suffering pain she could understand it better. But to have him so helpless, so patient, so anxious to talk about things that ordinarily he would have kept to himself, was beyond her experience. A feeling of sick terror took possession of her.

“Jiminy! Am I talking your head off?” Stan demanded, hearing the quivering sigh that escaped her. He raised himself on one elbow and tried to look at her. “Say, are you getting soaked? I bet you didn’t put a single twig over yourself. Here, take some of mine.”

In another instant he would have swept away Jane’s carefully constructed covering, but she caught his arm. “Don’t do that,” she said sharply; “you’re making lots of work for me. I’ll find some more.”

It was a relief to get up and grope around for some of the under branches where the rain had not penetrated, and it helped her to control the clutching feeling at her throat which had been steadily growing worse for the last half-hour. Finally, before she went back to sit down, she



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shouted, as long as her throat would let her, but still there was no answering sound.

"Would you mind if I just tell you one thing—no, two things more?" Stanley asked hesitatingly, when Jane had sat down on some pine branches and was spreading others over herself. "I've been thinking about them while you were busy, and it doesn't hurt me to talk. It—it makes me feel better, I think."

"Of course I don't mind. Talk away." Jane shut her mouth together hard, and wished he'd be cross and complaining. She could stand almost anything better than this.

"Well, that afternoon after you saved Sylvia—and I—I didn't," Stanley drew a deep breath as if the memory still hurt, "something—while I was on the way from Miss Tinkle's to Rivercroft—made me brace up and vow I wouldn't let that failure knock me out, and that I wouldn't go to your mother and—and play baby. And I kept telling myself that the next time—or some time—I'd win out if it took a leg. Crikey! It seems to have taken two, doesn't it?" he ended with a return to boyishness that gave Jane some relief.

"Oh, but that isn't anything that's going to last. I won't have it," she cried.

"Good for you. I won't either," the boy seconded valiantly. "Say, do you know, I believe



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they'd go to Joy Island first, and that's why they're so long in coming," he went on, as if the subject had just occurred to him.

"I suppose so," agreed Jane, who had fancied a dozen times that she heard the splash of a paddle. "I don't believe it's much use to keep shouting; they're sure to make a noise."

"I've never been able to understand," said Stanley, going back to his former subject with surprising suddenness, "what it was that braced me up that day. Why, it was just like having courage poured into me. I suppose things do happen like that right out of a clear sky sometimes."

"I suppose so," Jane said again hoarsely. She understood now why Stan had looked so different when he had come back with her mother. She was glad he would never have to know what she had thought the reason for the change in him.

"Hark! What was that?" Stanley said excitedly. "I thought I heard——" the stillness forced itself upon him, and he left the sentence unfinished. "There was one more thing that seemed awfully strange to me," he hurried on, as if afraid to let the silence continue. "The morning that Rob went away I found in my raincoat pocket some poetry that just seemed to fit. I haven't the faintest idea how it got there, unless,



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perhaps, your mother—she's done things like that two or three times. It begins :

“ ‘ One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward, ’ ”

he ended dreamily.

“ Mother gave that to Davy and me to learn,” said Jane, thinking very fast meanwhile. If it had helped him to believe that it was put there purposely for him, she wasn't going to tell him that it was just a mistake. “ We love it.”

“ So do I. I've learned it, too. I believe I've said over that line —

“ ‘ Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, ’ a million times more or less. Jane, have I talked you to death? I can really hear a sound now.”

Jane sprang to her feet and listened. First came the murmur of voices, and then from the lake floated the notes of the bugle-call with which Mr. Prescott waked them in the morning. And, as that died away, David's voice shouted, “ Jane! Stan! Jane Stuart! ”

Jane called and called, but it seemed an incredibly long time before she could be sure that they had heard her voice. After that she kept on shouting to them, until, when the first glimmer of the lanterns found her, she could scarcely speak, and frightened David by staring at him dumbly.



## “We Fall to Rise”

“I—I was afraid you couldn’t find us to-night,” Stan said in an exhausted whisper, when Dr. Warren went down on his knees beside him with a quick question or two. “Can’t you—can’t you send Jane home—right away?”

“We’ll take care of you both now. Does it hurt here—or here?” Alec Warren was feeling of legs and back with quick, skilful fingers, and watching the boy’s face by the light of the lantern Don was holding.

“David, you start ahead with Jane and get home as soon as you can,” he advised. “We can’t go fast through the woods with Stan. And don’t let Jane speak another word aloud to-night.”

Jane, by this time voiceless, stumbled along the path under the dripping trees until they reached the canoe. It had stopped raining now, and the stars were out, but she scarcely realized it, and sat with her eyes closed after David had made her as comfortable as he could. Every other feeling was obscured by her fear for Stanley, which increased with the moments.



## CHAPTER XVIII

“THANK GOODNESS!”

THE journey to Rivercroft the next day was carried through by Dr. Warren's order, and if it had seemed long when they were all well and happy, it was interminable when two of the party were ill. Every one breathed more freely when the trying day was at an end, and Jane and Stanley were safely sheltered in Aunt Caroline's house.

“You're not to get up to-day. Dr. Alec says so,” announced Judy, coming in with Jane's breakfast the next morning. “He says two or three days in bed will make you all right.”

Jane, still unable to speak aloud, made no protest against staying in bed. Her mother had already decided that when they first woke. Neither was she troubled about her own condition. “How's Stan?” she whispered.

“Pretty bad, I guess,” Judy answered, with the alacrity of one who enjoys telling unpleasant news. “They telegraphed for Mr. Oliver last night, and this morning Dr. Alec's sent for the Rivercroft doctor. Why, Jane, what makes your hand shake so? You've spilled your milk all over. I'll call mother.”



## “Thank Goodness !”

But when Mrs. Stuart, who was already on the way, came into the room, Jane could only motion to have the tray taken away. “I can’t eat,” she whispered. “My throat shuts up—tight.”

Mother sent the tray away, and followed Judy out into the hall on the pretext of a message to Aunt Caroline. Then she came back and sat down by Jane’s bed.

“Stan slept better than you did last night,” she said, patting the hand held out to her. “He’s quite pleased because Uncle Stephen sent a night letter to his father. He says he never wanted to see him so much as he does now.”

Jane’s eyes traveled around the room in search of something. “Pencil—and paper,” she whispered, and when her wants had been supplied, wrote, “Do you think Stan is going to get well?”

Her mother paused before answering. “Yes, I do,” she said at last. “I was trying to be sure what I really did believe. I seem to have great confidence in Anthony—in Dr. Warren, and he assures us that it is not unusual for a blow on the back to cause—to cause a condition like this. And he has seen complete recovery in many cases.”

Jane drew a deep breath. Then she scribbled again, and her mother’s smooth forehead puckered over the illegible writing. Finally she made out that it said—“If I hadn’t insisted on going, we



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

should both have been in Porcupine Lodge. Stan said that it looked like a storm."

"So you are blaming yourself for the accident?" Mrs. Stuart asked, and at her daughter's nod, went on quickly, "Jane, darling, we all do many things that don't bring the results we expect. Wise acts as well as foolish ones seem to turn against us sometimes, and we mustn't feel too responsible for our share in the world's happenings. Particularly when we think we're doing the right thing, as, no doubt, you did that time."

Jane gazed at her mother with eyes that held a lingering doubt and distress, but she did not try to speak, and the pencil lay idle under her listless fingers.

"Stan could hardly wait," Mrs. Stuart hurried on, "until he got a moment alone with me, and could tell me that—that this time he didn't hesitate nor feel afraid. Doesn't it comfort you to have that mean so much to him?"

Jane shook her head mutely, and sudden tears came into her eyes. She dabbed at them with her handkerchief, and seized the pencil. "That's what scares me to death," she wrote. "He's so good." She underlined the last two words with an increasing number of dashes. "And in the woods he was so patient, and he talked all the time to keep up my courage, and it nearly killed me because



## “Thank Goodness!”

he was so cheerful.” Her busy pencil paused, and she looked frowningly at the paper, and slowly made a large, black period after the last sentence. Then she looked up at her mother imploringly. “Do you—do you think any one so good as that ever lives to grow old?” she ended in a pathetic whisper.

“Oh, Janey!” Mrs. Stuart laughed softly, and her daughter’s heart grew lighter. Mother never could laugh like that, she told herself, if she didn’t really believe Stan was going to be better.

“Jane, darling, if there weren’t a great deal of the finest courage and goodness alive in the world it wouldn’t be worth much. I couldn’t be made to believe that any one was ever too good to live,” Mrs. Stuart went on with comforting decision. “It will take a long time to convince me that Stan isn’t coming out all right, sooner or later. And you must get well as soon as you can, and help the rest of us to make it pleasant for him while he’s a prisoner.”

“I will,” whispered Jane, with all the fervor she could muster. “I think my throat—doesn’t feel quite so tight now.”

“Good. I’m going down-stairs, and fix something perfectly delicious for you to drink. You can be guessing what it is.”

Mr. Oliver came late that afternoon, and as he



## Jane Stuart at Rivercroft

passed her door with Dr. Warren, Jane waked from a nap, and heard him say in his quick, nervous way, "I—I understand the doctor here doesn't think so favorably——" And then they went out of hearing, leaving her to struggle with a new anxiety.

Mrs. Stuart, who had been sitting by the window, came over to the bed as Jane stirred. "Did you have a good sleep, dear? Stan's father has just come, so the boy will be quite happy, I suppose."

Jane reached for her pencil and tablet. "Does the Rivercroft doctor think he won't get well?" she wrote tremulously, and her worried eyes hung on her mother's face while the question was read.

"Why, he isn't so hopeful as Dr. Warren is, but that doesn't seem to change our young doctor's opinion at all. He's quite firm in his belief that there will be definite improvement within a week, and I'm pinning my faith on him. He's had a great deal of hospital practice abroad, Janey, and he's a very skilful doctor, I'm sure."

"You're such a comfort," Jane whispered, resting a hot cheek against her mother's cool one. Then she seized the pencil again. "Two or three times I've thought I was going to speak out loud," she scribbled hastily, "but it doesn't come."



## “Thank Goodness!”

“It will,” promised mother. “Turn around so that I can massage your throat a little. That may help.”

The next day seemed long in prospect to Jane, for the doctor decreed that no one but mother or Hilda should stay with her.

“You see, Jane, when Carol and the others come into the room you want to talk back, and it makes your throat tighter because you can’t,” he explained. “Give it one day of absolute rest, and help out by trying to think that everything’s all right with every one.”

“I’ll try,” whispered Jane with a shaky smile.

“That’s what Stan said you’d answer,” Dr. Alec went on unexpectedly. “I told him I was going to put it up to you to help yourself, and he said, ‘I bet you a dime she’ll try. Jane’s a good sport, all right.’ By the way, he sent you a note.”

As Dr. Alec left the room, Jane took a slip of paper from its envelope, and pulled out with it some of the letters belonging to a game of Ken’s.

“DEAR JANE: (the note began)

“Judy says you’re worrying about me. Forget it. I’m going to be all right. I did all the talking, and you got the bad throat. It was mean of me to wish it on you. Once more, forget it and brace up. I bet I’ll get well first if you don’t hurry.



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"Ken brought up his letters and I'm sending you some 'pi.' It's five words that make a sentence. P-i-e would not be good for you, perhaps, but this is a very nourishing kind of pi, and is warranted to help your throat.

"STAN.

"P. S. There are 28 letters, and the first word begins with N and the last one ends with K."

Mrs. Stuart provided a box-cover, and Jane counted the letters as she shook them out of the envelope. "Perhaps if I can get one word I shall know the whole sentence," she whispered.

"Don't work long at a time over it," cautioned mother. "Hilda is going to bring over a book she thinks you will like to hear."

So the day which had promised to be long passed quickly after all, but in spite of frequent attempts, Jane got no clue to her "pi" until late in the afternoon, when mother went down-stairs to get some supper for her. Then, as she was aimlessly pushing the letters about, three or four grouped themselves in a way that gave her a suggestion, and at once she built the word "clouds." After that, just as she had guessed, the whole sentence came to her, and she placed the letters with N at the beginning, and K at the end.

"Never doubted clouds would break." She read the familiar line to herself, and put the box-cover



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gently on the bed, so that her mother might see that she had accomplished it. “That’s nourishing pi all right, only I don’t seem to be quite—quite brave enough for it.” She wished that some one were at hand to tell Stan that she had deciphered his puzzle. “Talk about my being a good sport. He’s one,” she said to herself, and with the thought came the nervous tightening of her throat, which, by this time, had become so familiar.

The house was very still, and Jane wondered what they were all doing. She knew that Mr. Oliver was sitting with Stanley, because mother had told her so, and she suspected that Hilda was talking with Dr. Alec on the piazza.

She fancied that the others might have gone for a walk, for though they were all very much subdued these days, they could hardly be as quiet as this.

Suddenly a door opened, and she heard Mr. Oliver run into the hall, and down-stairs, saying over and over in a sharp, excited tone, “Where’s the doctor? Where’s the doctor?”

Then Dr. Alec came over the stairs two steps at a time, and all in a minute there seemed to be a collection of persons in the hall. Jane clenched her hands, and felt herself shivering with dread. And, after an age, Judy came to her door, and danced up and down crying, “Stan’s got a prick-



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ing in his toes ! He's going to get well ! He's going to get well ! ”

“ Thank goodness,” said Jane, in a hoarse but perfectly audible voice, which sounded like sweetest music to the ears of her mother, just coming into the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, Jane sat on the steps in the sunshine, and watched the Tinkle Sisters, with their two guests, departing toward home. They had been having afternoon tea with the Rivercrofters, a last summer meeting, for on the next day Aunt Caroline's party would start for Belhaven.

“ ‘ Tinkle Sisters ’ look like different people,” murmured Jane, who was still somewhat restricted as to talking, and didn't know whether her voice would be high soprano or bass each time she attempted to use it. As David, who frequently dropped into rhyme, said —

“ Sometimes it's a growl ; sometimes a squeak.  
But what's the odds when Jane can speak ? ”

“ They're all going to be relatives to my poor children,” said Martin, who was sitting next to Jane, and somewhat laboriously writing names in a little blank book he carried around with him.

“ What am I ? ” demanded Carol.



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“You?” Martin consulted his list with great gravity. “You—you said you’d be a great-grand-mother,” he hesitated. “I b’lieve you were making fun, though.”

“Honey, I was. At least I was trying to be funny, and that’s detestable. I’ll be a cousin like the rest of the girls and boys.”

“What’s Miss Hilda?” Aunt Caroline asked.

The boy looked uncertain. “I wanted her to be an aunt. But she wouldn’t say surely.”

“That’s too bad. There she is now, just walking across the field with your uncle. Why don’t you go and ask her again?” Aunt Caroline’s eyes were sparkling with mischief.

“Oh, stay with us for a while, Martin,” Mrs. Stuart said, laying a restraining hand on the boy’s knee, and smiling at her aunt.

Uncle Stephen came out of the house just then. “I think I’ll go to walk,” he said, looking around for a possible companion. “Hello! There are Hilda and Dr. Warren. I believe I can overtake them.”

“Stephen Eliot, don’t you do any such thing,” protested Aunt Caroline, catching him by the arm. “Can’t you see through anything, and haven’t you any feeling for young people?”

Uncle Stephen stared at his wife with the light of comprehension illuminating his face. “You



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don't say so! And I've been fastening myself on that young man at every opportunity. Well, upon my word! Jane, my dear, would you mind knocking me on the head—just gently?"

Jane looked at mother, at Uncle Stephen, at her aunt, at Carol, and this latter young person smiled at her in a slightly superior fashion. "Haven't you guessed it before this?" she asked. "I've been sure for some time."

"This afternoon," Mrs. Stuart began quietly, "Hilda said that when I had a chance I might tell you that she had decided to be an aunt."

"Goodness, gracious!" exclaimed Jane, in a voice that began with a croak and ended with a squeak. "What a stupid I've been! Uncle Stephen, if I knock your head you'll have to knock mine. Oh, may I tell the others, mother? Where are Molly and Sylvia and the boys?"

"That makes a fambly," murmured Martin blissfully. "Uncle Alec, Aunt Hilda, Grandpa Prescott, Uncle Fritz, Cousin Martin." He counted them on his fingers, and lingered over the last title with such happiness in his voice that Mr. Eliot turned abruptly and started down the steps. "I promise to go in a totally different direction," he called.

"Please take me." Carol hurried after him. "Probably I shall never have a chance to talk



## “Thank Goodness !”

with you after we get back to Belhaven,” she said as they started off.

Jane got up from the steps. “I can’t wait another minute to find the others,” she murmured.

“Molly and Sylvia are with Stan, but the boys have taken Mr. Oliver for a walk,” said her mother.

Sylvia and Stanley were as obligingly surprised as Jane could wish, but Molly confessed to having suspected the truth. Stan, who was improving every day, was dressed and sitting by the window this afternoon, and looking very well and most contented.

“Will you stay within sound of Stan’s bell for a few minutes, Jane?” Molly said after a little. “Sylvia and I want to take one more look at the garden before it gets dark.”

Jane nodded an assent, and silenced Stan’s protestations with a wave of the hand. “It’s wonderful, isn’t it, how much you can say with your head and hands when you can’t use your voice,” she observed.

“Does it still hurt much to talk?”

“No-o. But it isn’t pretty.”

“Don’t you care. You can be mighty sure every one likes to hear it. It’s a wonder we didn’t both get something worse.”



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"I should have, if it hadn't been for you, and I don't believe I even said 'much obliged.'"

"Don't mention it. Let me know if I can do anything any time," and then they both laughed.

"Your mother would call us down for joking about serious things," Stan went on. "Say, Jane, it's been a great old summer—for me, at least—but I'm glad we're going back to Belhaven. I've got Rob on my mind."

"So have Spinksy and I. And, luckily, so has Uncle Stephen. He can help out if any of us can. Anyway, we're all going to 'stand by' as Davy says, and make him feel he has a lot of friends."

"You can just bet Molly and I will, too. And father—he's awfully interested in all our friends now. Somehow, father and I have straightened out a good many things since he's been up here."

"Well, I suppose the next thing on the program is school," Jane remarked after a little silence. "Strange as it may seem, I'm not sorry."

"Neither am I. I'm going to tutor with Mr. Prescott till I get on my feet, and then I'm going to study—like everything."

Stanley sat more erect in his chair, and his eyes looked bright and purposeful. "There come the boys and father," he said suddenly. "This is a great old window to see what's going on."

"They'll all fly up to see you the moment they



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get here,” murmured Jane. “Stan, I want to tell you something, just to make everything clear between us. You know the quotation you liked, in your raincoat pocket—I don’t mean you liked it in your pocket—but—you know. Well, I put it there by mistake. I meant it for Rob.”

“Oh,” began the boy slowly. Then he laughed. “It’s all right, then. He got it. I was too bashful to tell you I sent it to him.”

“Goodness! Did you? I sent it, too. The poor thing must have thought he was being deluged with helpful quotations.”

“We can explain later. And I’m mighty glad you made the mistake. I bet you didn’t suppose it would do me any good to read such a thing.”

Jane flushed. “That’s mean of you.” And then, because she proposed to have every doubt cleared away, she added honestly, “I didn’t—then. I know better now.”

“You don’t think now that I’m quite—so grouchy—and critical?”

“No—a dozen times, no,” cried Jane hoarsely, quite overwhelmed by this reference to former unpleasantness. Her eyes were shining, and in spite of her seriousness, the unruly dimple was trying to find a place in her cheek. “You’re not grouchy. You’re not nearly so critical as I am myself. And you’re not”—she paused, and then



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hurried on, for a small army was dashing up-stairs —“you’re not—a—blot.”

“Shake on it,” Stan said, holding out his hand with a look of deepest satisfaction.

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